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The Hudson Review

A magazine of literature and the arts

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TO OUR READERS

Publication of THE HUDSON REVIEW is supported by public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts. We wish to express our appreciation to this organization.

With regard to *Elegies* by Douglas Dunn, reviewed by Liam Rector in our Autumn 1986 issue, though it was stated that the book was not available in America, it has come to our attention that the publisher, Faber & Faber, does distribute it in the United States.

A new book by an Advisory Editor of THE HUDSON REVIEW has recently been published. In accordance with our policy, the book will not be reviewed in these pages, but is listed below for the interest of our readers:

HAYDEN CARRUTH: *Sitting In: Selected Writings on Jazz, Blues, and Related Topics*. University of Iowa Press. $22.50.

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Unsolicited mss will be read according to the following schedule: *Nonfiction*: January 1 through March 31, and October 1 through December 31; *Poetry*: April 1 through September 30; *Fiction*: June 1 through November 30. Unsolicited mss received at other times will be returned unread. Manuscripts submitted by subscribers who so identify themselves will be read throughout the year. Manuscripts will not be returned nor will inquiries be answered unless accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes. No responsibility is assumed for their loss or injury.

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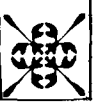

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Letter from London

DEAR H,

As the leaves in their royal parks turned copper, and began to fall, Londoners took to watching a new, home-grown soap opera on independent television, or Channel Four.

It is called "Paradise Postponed," by John Mortimer, a London lawyer turned dramatist who in 1958 had an early success on the stage with *Dock Brief*. Five years ago he adapted Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* for television; and his new venture, though it promises to run somewhat short of "Dallas" or "Dynasty" as continuing drama, is drawing audiences on a respectable scale. It is ripe evidence, too, of a mood in the British intelligentsia of the 1980s, or rather of that notoriously edgy, dissident element that tunes into Channel Four—"all kooks and kinks," I have heard them called—rather than into the two BBC channels or their commercial rival on ITV. Channel Four is elitism with commercials; and "Paradise Postponed," which is about the alleged evils of Thatcherite Britain, is by a socialist playwright aged 63, who was an active schoolboy Communist at Harrow during the war and who since the war has supported the socialist wing of the British Labor Party.

Paradise has been postponed, we must believe, because the three postwar Labor governments that started their five-to-six-year terms in 1945, 1964 and 1974 failed to bring it off. But patience. . . . There may well be a general election in 1987, and a change of government, and another forward lurch towards humanity, fair shares and a Bomb-free Britain. Mortimer's title parodies Milton's, but remotely. A fiercely secular spirit, he sees nothing much like the fall of man in Mrs. Thatcher's first victory in 1979—except that it was, and is, mainly the fault of a woman—and refuses to believe that anything as lasting as Eve's fault is worth contemplating. A new government, and a new order, could still mean paradise. By now the Labor opposition is committed to banning nuclear weapons and creating a million new jobs. Though it has fared rather badly in recent bye-elections, where its vote has consistently fallen, Mortimer still believes it has right and truth on its side. So perhaps there is a whiff of Miltonic faith about the new series, after all—the more so when you reflect that both *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes* appeared after the unjust restoration of Milton's conservative enemies. The true believer will not perish utterly, even when she—for Mortimer's heroine is the wife of a Tory cabinet minister—deliberately places herself in the full ardor of her anti-nuclear faith in front of a flock of charging police motorbikes at a nocturnal exercise for Cruise missiles. In fact she is mown down and left for dead by the forces of Thatcherite order—or so one episode has dramatically concluded.

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Theory in the Classroom

Edited by CARY NELSON

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The new series is notably acted. The mown-down nuclear protester is briskly played by Zoe Wanamaker, daughter of the American actor Sam Wanamaker who settled in England in 1952 when she was three, and who is nowadays involved in rebuilding Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in facsimile on the South Bank, near the spot where it once stood. Miss Wanamaker, needless to say of a National Theatre actress of standing and repute, sounds as British as she is meant to be, and plays the part of a bitterly disaffected wife who detests her husband's policies on defense and unemployment almost as much as she detests him. Her last straw has been to see a much-loved and sensitive son Nicky sent away against her will to a boarding school, or "public school," where for large fees he will have "all the advantages" (as her relatives assure her) of a private education. And when she threatens to save him from that fate by taking him off to live in London, her husband's lawyer brutally threatens her with a divorce action that will drag her name through the mud.

Unloved by an aristocratic mother as well as by a statesman-husband, it is no wonder if she wanders into lonely bars to drink double whiskies and be picked up. Such is John Mortimer's bleak view of Thatcherite Britain: mean-minded, snobbish and greedy. But I wonder how credible it looks to many of its viewers, dissident as some of them may be: how much a mirror of the times, or how much a sexagenarian voice from the past by a playwright guilty over the privileges of his own youth. The British Left is by now confused, disunited and fragmentary. In fact it has passed through so many stages since the Popular Front days of 1936-39 that its only surviving political expression, which is the Labor Party, begins to look as convulsive an ill-assortment of tendencies as a demented camel biting itself to death. In 1981 a large segment, including four of its most notable leaders, broke off to form the Social Democratic Party (SDP). Its old Left has already been usurped by Militant Tendency, which is notoriously given to gross intimidation and violence. Its most recent bye-election—Knowsley, near Liverpool, in November 1986—was in its third safest seat in the House of Commons, and was caused by the angry resignation of its sitting member, Robert Kilroy-Silk, whose committee had been permeated by militants until he despaired of his job. His resignation coincided with a book in which he attacked his own party leaders—*Hard Labour*—as well as the local Trotskyites who had made his life a hell; and in reply, Neil Kinnock as Labor leader was forced to impose his own moderate candidate against the bitter resentment of the local committee, who refused to work for the new man and had to be expelled *en bloc* from the Party. Moderate Labor held the seat, in the event, but by a majority which a zestful Liberal campaign reduced by almost two-thirds. And it is as certain as anything ever is in British politics that in the next House of Commons Labor will be dominated by the

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Left, whatever efforts the leadership may make to the contrary. The hatreds run wide and deep. Most Labor voters, meanwhile, are not socialists of any color, and vote for the party (when they bother to vote at all) out of a fading tribal loyalty or a vague sense that it might be time for a change. British voters want no part of socialism, as the Labor leaders know. What they want is a bigger slice of the capitalist cake.

Long after John Mortimer left Harrow and Oxford, however, a new breed of dramatist sprang up on the London stage. They are called, among others, Howard Barker, Howard Brenton, David Edgar, David Hare—"Why are they always called Howard or David?" I heard a playgoer wail the other day—and Edward Bond. Some twenty years younger than Mortimer, and survivors of 1960s-style campus Marxism, they practice epic theatre in the Brechtian mode, both in the commercial theatres of Shaftesbury Avenue and in the subsidized houses of the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company. Their plays stridently abuse the money-corruption of the rich consumer-societies of the West. Compared with the Howards and the Davids, John Mortimer looks something of a dinosaur. Their message tends to anarchy, his to a new order. Though the British police may sound polite, their plays proclaim, they are the lackeys of a bourgeois power-interest; the press is controlled by sinister barons not even born in Britain—the Left is nothing if not nationalistic; Northern Ireland and the Falklands were crises secretly fomented by the Thatcher government to win votes by inflaming militarism; and women and gays have been far too slow in claiming rights that should be theirs.

All that makes watching "Paradise Postponed" feel like an act of nostalgia for the vanished certitudes of the postwar years. Born in 1923, John Mortimer left Harrow for Oxford during the war, became a successful London lawyer, and was appointed Queen's Counsellor in 1966. His career represents the twin paradoxes of the Old Left: its ignorance of the life of the masses, except as seen from a car or train window; and its refusal to accept that the world has changed. A survivor from the old Stalinist Left, he is nothing of a Stalinist now. But it is a question whether his sense of British life has changed much since around 1950, except to notice that TV has largely replaced stage and cinema as the greatest play-consumer the world has ever seen. The Britain Mortimer presents is archaic. "Paradise Postponed" represents the governing Tory Party as led by clever careerists of humble origins who ape the manners of the country gentry. But Thatcherites are not like that. Careerists they may be, like some of their opponents. But the country gentleman lost his traditional grip on the Tory Party around 1965, when Edward Heath replaced Sir Alec Douglas-Home as its leader, to be succeeded after ten years by Mrs. Thatcher; and her cabinet is not mainly composed of gentlemen (in the technical sense), or even of

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persons claiming to be that, but of technicians fired by the ideology of Milton Friedman and making no bones of their modest social origins or of their determination to make it rich. Mrs. Thatcher herself is said to be contemptuous of the clubman type, being made of sterner stuff. Boarding schools, in any case, are no longer places where boys are "beaten and buggered," as Zoe Wanamaker is made to put it as a doting mother: in the 1960s they turned into smoothly efficient nurseries for highly competitive entrance into universities and the higher professions, and their meritocratic atmosphere is by now so imperative that nobody has to be beaten or otherwise assaulted: that would only interfere with good grades.

Thatcherite Britain is about personal success. In November 1986 the London money market was internationalized in what is universally known as the Big Bang, as if to signalize the swift growth of London in the last twenty years into the biggest currency market on earth. Mortimer misses so much that "Paradise Postponed" should have been called "Paradise Mislaid." The Britain he has failed to notice, living in a genteel suburb of north London known for its canals as Little Venice and (more recently) in Henley-on-Thames, where he cultivates a taste for gardening and the opera, is not a snobbish world but a yuppie world; and Mrs. Thatcher has won twice, and hopes to win a third time, not because the British are deferential to ancient tradition but because they see in her an embodiment of the modern British success story. A limited success, to be sure: labor costs are still too high for what is produced, the unions are quiet only because unemployment has made them afraid, sterling (though risen against the dollar) has fallen sharply against the Deutsche mark, and nobody really knows what is going to happen when North Sea oil runs out. But there is still success, in its way, and for millions. This is a nation far richer without an empire than it ever was with one. Thatcherism is a populist faith, not a patrician. It is often hard for aging radicals to realize that they are rejected not because they sound too daring but because they look too stale.

The simple truth is that Britain has outlived the simple dichotomies of Left and Right that many of the Mortimer generation believed were here to stay: rich and poor, educated and working class, state enterprise or private, having (or not having) the Bomb. Life simply isn't like that anymore. "Are you on our side? Or are you on the other side?", his women sing picketing a nuclear base, proud in their moral certitudes. "Neither," one imagines many of their viewers murmuring to themselves.

London society is now a world of subtly gradated wealth and privilege, impatient of such simplicities. It is a world of high but highly unequal professional salaries, not least in the hectic money market; of soaring house prices; and of people who are rich and

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choosy enough to insist on exceptional pleasures for jaded and demanding cultural palates. The visible consequences are notable. London probably has more live theatre, for example, than Paris and New York put together. Its restaurants are various and exotic, not to say esoteric. Its musical life is inexhaustible; and the Royal College of Music, handily situated behind the Royal Albert Hall, has just built itself a new opera house inside its courtyard known as the Benjamin Britten Theatre to seat some four hundred spectators, where the talents of its singers and instrumentalists are soon to be displayed nightly. When Queen Elizabeth II opened it in 1986 before television cameras, its audience looked like a show-place of the best talents in music, architecture and theatre. This, it may be righteously insisted, is not a world as worried as it should be by Cruise missiles, African famine or four million unemployed at home. Perhaps not. But it is a city of refined merry-making in a place with a tradition of making merry at least as old as Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, and it is congenitally inhospitable to the suggestion that we should all be better off if we were to stop enjoying ourselves.

Some of the new enjoyment takes intriguing forms. One buoyant new service industry in the British capital is the dinner party, where small entrepreneurs undertake to bring, cook and serve elegant dinners in your home and clear the mess away afterwards. Domestic servants have not returned—they faded away, as a breed, in the 1950s, to be replaced by hard-to-find females who clean by the hour and dictate their own terms. But skilled special services, at a price, are the mode of the moment. So is public activity, in whatever sphere. Feminism is a middle-aged phenomenon by now, and of slight interest to the modern girl. But Sarah Duchess of York has just learned to fly, as her husband Prince Andrew—himself a professional flying instructor in the Royal Navy—enthusiastically told a formal lunch at the Guildhall the other day, and the mood is as much about What-You-Do as Who-You-Are. No wonder plays and TV series in the old socialist mould have a tired and dogged look. Work is chic, and authors need to notice the world they live in and live on. In a recent interview, John Mortimer boasted about how little he leaves his comfortable home. Needlessly. One suspects he hardly dares to look at this England now. Private enterprise is nowadays a distressingly popular idea, at least to anyone taught at Eton or Harrow to think it wicked. And with a shrinking proletariat, and more and more people living longer and investing for old age, not least in newly privatized industries like gas or British Airways, the world is obstinately refusing to move in the direction that the forefathers of the Labor movement once planned and dreamed.

No matter: British politics still looks like a contest worth watching.

Once a tedious seesaw between the organized interests of capital

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and labor, it has been recently rent apart by the turbulent upsurge of the Alliance, which links the old Liberal Party and the new Social Democrats into a single electoral slate with one program and two leaders. Commonly known as the two Davids—David Owen of the SDP and David Steel of the Liberals—the Alliance is polling well ahead of its 1983 performance, when it achieved 27% of the votes cast; and there is a suspicion abroad that, as an imaginatively geared machine with a talent for gimmickry and the blessing of magnetic leaders, its potential is large and imponderable—a joker in the electoral pack. It is regionally varied. For the moment, it looks like replacing Labor as the chief opposition in the south of England and the Conservatives as chief opposition in the north. The British voter is profoundly swayed by an instinct to vote for that party most likely to defeat the party he most dislikes. The parties knowingly respond. One is bombarded at election time with rival interpretations of local voting figures: each his own Gallup. And the voter chooses his allegiance, if anything so fleeting can be called that, by discarding the candidate most likely to come in third. In 1983 Alliance candidates, though they won only twenty-three seats in the Commons, came first or second in just over half the seats.

In all this—to return to "Paradise Postponed" and its kindred dramatic phenomena—the survival of a socialist theatre in England is a remarkable fact. The novel is a far bigger literary form than the play, but there is next-to-no socialist fiction today, and not much since Galsworthy died in 1933, at least of a clear and unequivocal kind. A famous batch of new novelists thrown up by the 1950s—Kingsley Amis, Iris Murdoch and the like—were then on the point of turn, politically speaking, and they abandoned their socialist faith in the 1960s or soon after, pushed out by the excesses of the New Left and the unheroic performance of the Wilson-Callaghan governments. The new novel of the 1980s is scarcely political at all; indeed there is a marked return to romance, as in Anita Brookner's prize-winning *Hotel du Lac* (1984). Socialist drama, by contrast, seems a hardier breed, and its champions have recently collaborated on a radio program in order to triumph a little—and why not?—on keeping their torch lit and even aloft. Socialist plays abound on the London stage. *Pravda*, by Howard Brenton and David Hare, has just completed a successful run at the National Theatre, and it portrays a rich and ruthless newspaper tycoon not wholly distinct from Mr. Rupert Murdoch, an Australian who now owns the *Times* of London as well as a paper or two in New York, where he lives. Its political effects may be slight. It is a fair assumption that Mr. Murdoch can go on owning the *Times* of London and appointing its editors for as long as he wants to; and another that many who bought tickets for *Pravda* will continue to buy the *Times* and read it. So why do they do it—apart from admiring the undoubted acting talents of Anthony Hopkins in the role of a ruthless newspaper proprietor?

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The answer, such as it is, may be to ask another question. Why did more or less contented and prosperous audiences buy tickets for Bernard Shaw's plays in the 1920s and 1930s—plays that adulated Communism and demanded the overthrow of the parliamentary system? Presumably because it amused them to hear institutions in which they believed reviled and abused. That, after all, is one of the characteristic pleasures—perhaps one should say *the* characteristic pleasure—of free men. It is the Western way to live. East of the Iron Curtain, you can probably find someone else to cook and serve dinner, at least if you are a Party member; but you cannot go on to a public performance of a play that reviles the Soviet system. That self-critical fashion sprang up in the Western industrial world in the 1960s, and it has still not quite departed. I have seen well-heeled German audiences applauding neo-Marxist revues in Munich and Cologne; and London too is full of sketches, TV serials and plays assailing the existing system from the monarchy down through the House of Lords to the Commons, the finance markets, the press, the ancient schools and universities of the kingdom, and the social whirl in general. Satire is not really dead, though it has turned a bit tired and grumpy. It lingers on—composed in defiant ardor by a dwindling band of visionaries who in youth glimpsed the light of a far utopia, and cannot quite bring themselves to believe that it is even further off now than then.

But perhaps (as social analysts say when they consider the vice industry) it is the customers we should be worrying about more than the providers. Why do audiences who do not want left-wing novels or left-wing governments watch left-wing plays and serials? Not out of conviction, it seems fair to guess; and not out of any sense of gratified realism, it seems even fairer. *Pravda* was no more a credible account of British newspaper life around Fleet Street than "Paradise Postponed" is of the home life of a Conservative cabinet minister. I do not certainly know the answer to the question. But there is a strong smell of bread-and-circuses about the socialist drama of 1980s Britain—a sense of an exotic spectacle played out before sensation-avid audiences, as if by the wild animals and martyrs of ancient Rome. Such actions are highly remote from human concern. Life is not like that, and we know it is not. Nor does anyone want it to be like that—least of all the playwrights who profit handsomely from the world we are in.

But perhaps, just for an hour or two, we might license ourselves to fantasize, and suppose . . .

GEORGE WATSON

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WENDELL BERRY

Writer and Region

I first read *Huckleberry Finn* when I was a young boy. My great-grandmother's copy was in the bookcase in my grandparents' living room in Port Royal, Kentucky. It was the Webster edition, with E. W. Kemble's illustrations. My mother may have told me that it was a classic, but I did not *know* that it was, for I had no understanding of that category, and I did not read books because they were classics. I don't remember starting to read *Huckleberry Finn*, or how many times I read it; I can only testify that it is a book that is, to me, literally familiar: involved in my family life.

I can say too that I "got a lot out of it." From early in my childhood I was not what was known as a good boy. My badness was that I was headstrong and did not respond positively to institutions. School and Sunday school and church were prisons to me. I loved being out of them, and I did not behave well in them. *Huckleberry Finn* gave me a comforting sense of precedent, and it refined my awareness of the open, outdoor world that my "badness" tended toward.

That is to say that *Huckleberry Finn* made my boyhood imaginable to me in a way that it otherwise would not have been. And, later, it helped to make my grandfather's boyhood in Port Royal imaginable to me. Still later, when I had come to some knowledge of literature and history, I saw that that old green book had, fairly early, made imaginable to me my family's life as inhabitants of the great river system to which we, like Mark Twain, belonged. The world my grandfather had grown up in, in the eighties and nineties, was not greatly changed from the world of Mark Twain's boyhood in the thirties and forties. And the vestiges of that world had not entirely passed away by my own boyhood in the thirties and forties of the next century.

My point is that *Huckleberry Finn* is about a world I know, or knew, which it both taught me about and taught me to

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imagine. That it did this before I could have known that it was doing it, and certainly before anybody told me to expect it to do it, suggests its greatness to me more forcibly than any critical assessment that I have ever read. It is called a great American book; I think of it, because I have so experienced it, as a transfiguring regional book.

As a boy resentful of enclosures, I think I felt immediately the great beauty, the great liberation, at first so fearful to him, of the passage in Chapter I, when Huck, in a movement that happens over and over in his book, escapes the strictures of the evangelical Miss Watson, and, before he even leaves the house, comes into the presence of the country:

> By-and-by they fetched the niggers in and had prayers, and then everybody was off to bed. I went up to my room with a piece of candle and put it on the table. Then I set down in a chair by the window and tried to think of something cheerful, but it warn't no use. I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead. The stars was shining, and the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heard an owl, away off, who-whooing about somebody that was dead, and a whippoorwill and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me and I couldn't make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers run over me.

It is a fearful liberation because the country, so recently settled by white people, is already both haunted and threatened. But the liberation is nevertheless authentic, both for Huck and for the place and the people he speaks for. In the building and summoning rhythm of his catalogue of the night sounds, in the sudden realization (his and ours) of the equality of his voice to his subject, we feel a young intelligence breaking the confines of convention and expectation to confront the world itself: the night, the woods, and eventually the river and all it would lead to.

By now we can see the kinship, in this respect, between Huck's voice and earlier ones to the east. We feel the same sort of outbreak as we read:

> When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Con-

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> cord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the work of my hands only.

That was thirty years before *Huckleberry Finn*. The voice is certainly more cultivated, more adult, more reticent, but the compulsion to get *out* is the same.

And a year after that we hear:

> I loaf and invite my soul,
> I lean and loaf at ease . . . observing a spear of summer grass.

And we literally *see* the outbreak here as Whitman's line grows long and prehensile to include the objects and acts of a country's life that had not been included in verse before.

But Huck's voice is both fresher and historically more improbable than those. There is something miraculous about it. It is not Mark Twain's voice. It is the voice, we can only say, of a great genius named Huckleberry Finn, who inhabited a somewhat lesser genius named Mark Twain, who inhabited a frustrated businessman named Samuel Clemens. And Huck speaks of and for and as his place, the gathering place of the continent's inland waters. His is a voice governed always by the need to flow, to move outward.

It seems miraculous also that this voice should have risen suddenly out of the practice of "comic journalism," a genre amusing enough sometimes, but extremely limited, now hard to read and impossible to need. It was this way of writing that gave us what I understand as regional*ism*: work that is ostentatiously provincial, condescending, and exploitive. That *Huckleberry Finn* starts from there is evident from its first paragraph. The wonder is that within three pages the genius of the book is fully revealed, and it is a regional genius that for 220 pages (in the Library of America edition) remains untainted by regionalism. The voice is sublimely confident of its own adequacy to its own necessities, its eloquence. Throughout those pages the book never condescends to its characters or its subject; it never glances over its shoulder at literary opinion; it never fears for its reputation in any "center of culture"; it reposes, like Eliot's Chinese jar, moving and still, at the center of its own occasion.

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I should add too that the outbreak or upwelling of this voice, impulsive and freedom-bent as it is, is not disorderly. The freeing of Huck's voice is not a feat of power. The voice is enabled by an economy and a sense of pace that are infallible, and innately formal.

That the book fails toward the end—in the 67 pages, to be exact, that follow the reappearance of Tom Sawyer—is pretty generally acknowledged. It does not fail exactly into the vice that is called regionalism, though its failure may have influenced or licensed the regionalism that followed; it fails into a curious frivolity. It has been all along a story of escape. A runaway slave is an escaper, and Huck is deeply implicated, finally by his deliberate choice, in Jim's escape; but he is making his own escape, as well, from Miss Watson's indoor piety. After Tom re-enters the story, these authentic escapes culminate in a bogus one: the freeing of a slave who, as Tom knows, has already been freed. It is as though Mark Twain has recovered authorship of the book from Huck Finn at this point—only to discover that he does not know how to write it.

Then occurs the wounding and recovery of Tom and the surprising entrance of his Aunt Polly who, true to her character, clears things up in no time—a delightful scene; there is wonderful writing in the book right through to the end.

But Mark Twain is not yet done with his theme of escape. The book ends with Huck's determination to "light out for the Territory" to escape being adopted and "sivilized" by Tom's Aunt Sally. And here, I think, we are left face to face with a flaw in Mark Twain's character that is also a flaw in our national character, a flaw in our history, and a flaw in much of our literature.

As I have said, Huck's point about Miss Watson is well taken and well made. There is an extremity, an enclosure, of conventional piety and propriety that needs to be escaped. A part of the business of young people is to escape it. But this point, having been made once, does not need to be made again. In the last sentence, Huck is made to suggest a virtual identity between Miss Watson and Aunt Sally. But the two women are not at all alike. Aunt Sally is a sweet, motherly, entirely affectionate woman, from whom there is little need to

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escape because she has no aptitude for confinement. The only time that she succeeds in confining Huck, she does so by *trusting* him. And so when the book says, "Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before," one can only conclude that it is not Huck talking about Aunt Sally, but Mark Twain talking, still, about the oppressive female piety of Miss Watson.

Something is badly awry here. At the end of this great book we are asked to believe, or to believe that Huck believes, that there are no choices between the "civilization" represented by pious slave-owners such as Miss Watson or lethal "gentlemen" such as Col. Sherburn, and lighting out for the Territory. This hopeless polarity marks the exit of Mark Twain's highest imagination from his work. Afterwards, we get *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, a fine book, but inferior to *Huckleberry Finn*, and then the inconsolable grief, bitterness, and despair of the last years.

It is arguable, I think, that our country's culture is still suspended as if at the end of *Huckleberry Finn*, assuming that its only choices are either a deadly "civilization" of piety and violence or an escape into some "Territory" where we may remain free of adulthood and community obligation. We want to be free; we want to have rights; we want to have power; we do not yet want much to do with responsibility. We have imagined the great and estimable freedom of boyhood, of which Huck Finn remains the finest spokesman. We have imagined the bachelorhoods of nature and genius and power: the contemplative, the artist, the hunter, the cowboy, the general, the president—lives dedicated and solitary in the Territory of individual adventure or responsibility. But boyhood and bachelorhood have remained our norms of "liberation," for women as well as men. We have hardly begun to imagine the coming to responsibility that is the meaning, and the liberation, of growing up. We have hardly begun to imagine community life, and the tragedy that is at the heart of community life.

Mark Twain's avowed preference for boyhood, as the time of truthfulness, is well known. Beyond boyhood, he glimpsed the possibility of bachelorhood, an escape to "the Territory,"

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where individual freedom and integrity might be maintained—and so, perhaps, he imagined Pudd'nhead Wilson, a solitary genius devoted to truth and justice, standing apart in the preserve of cynical honesty.

He also imagined Aunt Polly and Aunt Sally. They, I think, are the true grownups of the Mississippi novels. They have their faults, of course, which are the faults of their time and place, but mainly they are decent people, responsible members of the community, faithful to duties, capable of love, trust, and long-suffering, willing to care for orphan children. The characters of both women are affectionately drawn; Mark Twain evidently was moved by them. And yet he made no acknowledgement of their worth. He insists upon regarding them as dampeners of youthful high spirits, and in the end he refuses to distinguish them at all from the objectionable Miss Watson.

There is, then, something stunted in *Huckleberry Finn*. I have hated to think so, for a long time I tried consciously *not* to think so, but it is so. What is stunted is the growth of Huck's character. When Mark Twain replaces Huck as author, he does so apparently to make sure that Huck remains a boy. Huck's growing up, which through the crisis of his fidelity to Jim ("All right, then, I'll *go* to hell") has been central to the drama of the book, is suddenly thwarted first by the Tom-foolery of Jim's "evasion," and then by Huck's planned escape to the "Territory." The real "evasion" of the last chapters is Huck's, or Mark Twain's, evasion of the community responsibility which would have been a natural and expectable next step after his declaration of loyalty to his friend. Mark Twain's failure or inability to imagine this possibility was a disaster for his finest character, Huck, whom we next see, not as a grown man but as a partner in another boyish evasion, a fantastical balloon-excursion to the Pyramids.

I am supposing, then, that *Huckleberry Finn* fails in failing to imagine a responsible, adult community life. And I am supposing further that this is the failure of Mark Twain's life, and of our life, so far, as a society.

Community life, as I suggested earlier, is tragic, and it is so because it involves unremittingly the need to survive mortal-

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ity, partiality, and evil. Because they so clung to boyhood, and to the boy's vision of free bachelorhood, neither Huck Finn nor Mark Twain could enter community life as I am attempting to understand it. A boy can experience grief and horror, but he cannot experience that fulfillment and catharsis of grief, fear, and pity that we call tragedy, and remain a boy. Nor can he experience tragedy in solitude or as a stranger, for it is only experienceable in the context of a beloved community. The fulfillment and catharsis that Aristotle described as the communal result of tragic drama is an artificial enactment of the way a mature community survives tragedy in fact. The community wisdom of tragic drama is in the implicit understanding that no community can survive that cannot survive the worst. Tragic drama attests to the community's need to survive the worst that it knows or imagines can happen.

In his own life Mark Twain experienced deep grief over the deaths of loved ones, and also severe financial losses. But these experiences seem to have had the effect of isolating him, rather than binding him to a community. The experience of great personal loss, moreover, is not much dealt with in those Mississippi books that are most native to his imagination: *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Life on the Mississippi*. The only such experience that I remember in those books is the story, in *Life on the Mississippi*, of his brother Henry's death after an explosion on the steamboat *Pennsylvania*. Twain's account of this is extremely moving, but it is peculiar in that he represents himself—though his mother, a brother, and a sister still lived—as Henry's *only* mourner. No other family member is mentioned.

What is wanting, apparently, is the tragic imagination that, through communal form or ceremony, permits great loss to be recognized, suffered, and borne, and that makes possible some sort of consolation and renewal. What is wanting is the return to the beloved community, or to the possibility of one. That would return us to a renewed and corrected awareness of our partiality and mortality, but also to healing and to joy in a renewed awareness of our love and hope for one another. Without that return we may know innocence and horror and grief, but not tragedy and joy. Not consolation or for-

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giveness or redemption. There is grief and horror in Mark Twain's life and work, but not the tragic imagination or the imagined tragedy that finally delivers from grief and horror.

He seems rather to have gone deeper and deeper into grief and horror as his losses accumulated, and deeper into outrage as he continued to meditate on the injustices and cruelties of history. At the same time he withdraws farther and farther from community and the imagining of community, until at last his Hadleyburg—such a village as he had earlier written about critically enough, but with sympathy and good humor too—becomes merely a target. It receives an anonymous and indiscriminate retribution for its greed and self-righteousness—evils that community life has always had to oppose, correct, ignore, indulge, or forgive in order to survive. All observers of communities have been aware of such evils, Huck Finn having been one of the acutest of them, but now it is as if Huck has been replaced by Colonel Sherburn. "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" is based on the devastating assumption that people are no better than their faults. In old age, Mark Twain had become obsessed with "the damned human race" and the malevolence of God—ideas that were severely isolating and, ultimately, self-indulgent. He was finally incapable of that magnanimity that is the most difficult and the most necessary: forgiveness of human nature and human circumstance. Given human nature and human circumstance, our only relief is in this forgiveness, which then restores us to community and its ancient cycle of loss and grief, hope and joy.

And so it seems to me that Mark Twain's example remains crucial for us, both for its virtues and its faults. He taught American writers to be writers by teaching them to be *regional* writers. The great gift of *Huckleberry Finn*, in itself and to us, is its ability to be regional without being provincial. Provincialism is always self-conscious. It is the conscious sentimentalization of or condescension to or apology for a province. In its most acute phase, it is the fear of provinciality. It is what I earlier called "regionalism." There is, as I said, none of that in the first thirty-two chapters of *Huckleberry Finn*. (In the final eleven chapters it is there in the person of Tom Sawyer,

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who is a self-made provincial.) Mark Twain apparently knew, or he had the grace to trust Huck to know, that *every* writer is a regional writer, even if he or she writes about a fashionable region such as New York City. The value of this insight, embodied as it is in a great voice and a great tale, is simply unreckonable. If he had done nothing else, that would have made him indispensable to us.

But his faults are our own, just as much as his virtues. There are two chief faults and they are related: the yen to escape to the Territory, and retribution against the life that one has escaped or wishes to escape. Mark Twain was new, for his place, in his virtue. In his faults he was old, a spokesman for tendencies already long-established in our history. That these tendencies remain well-established among us ought to be clear enough. Wallace Stegner had them in mind when he wrote, in *The Sound of Mountain Water*:

> For many, the whole process of intellectual and literary growth is a movement, not through or beyond, but away from the people and society they know best, the faiths they still at bottom accept, the little raw provincial world for which they keep an apologetic affection.

Mr. Stegner's "away from" indicates, of course, an escape to the Territory. And there are many kinds of Territory to escape to. The Territory that hinterland writers have escaped to has almost always been first of all that of some metropolis or "center of culture." This is not necessarily dangerous because it is not necessarily an escape. Great cities are probably necessary to the life of the arts, and all of us who have gone to them have benefitted.

But once one has reached the city, other Territories open up, and some of these *are* dangerous. There is, first, the Territory of condescension and retribution toward one's origins. In our country, this is not just a Territory but virtually a literary genre. From the sophisticated, cosmopolitan city, one's old home begins to look like a "little raw provincial world." One begins to deplore "small town gossip" and "the suffocating proprieties of small town life"—forgetting that gossip occurs only among people who know each other, and that propriety is a dead issue only among strangers. The danger is

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not just in the falsification, the false generalization, that necessarily attends a *distant* scorn or anger, but also in the loss of the subject or the vision of community life, and in the very questionable exemption that scorners and avengers customarily issue to themselves.

And so there is the Territory of self-righteousness. It is easy to assume that we do not participate in what we are not in the presence of. But if we are members of a society, we participate, willy-nilly, in its evils. Not to know this is obviously to be in error, but it is also to neglect some of the most necessary and the most interesting work. How do we reduce our dependency on what is wrong? The answer to that question will necessarily be practical, and will be correctable by practice and by practical standards. Another name for self-righteousness is economic and political unconsciousness.

There is also the Territory of historical self-righteousness: if *we* had lived south of the Ohio in 1830, *we* would not have owned slaves; if *we* had lived on the frontier, *we* would have killed no Indians, violated no treaties, stolen no land. But the probability is overwhelming that if we had belonged to the generations we deplore, we would have behaved deplorably. The probability is overwhelming that we *belong* to a generation that will be found by its successors to have behaved deplorably. Not to know that is, again, to be in error and to neglect essential work, and some of this work, as before, is work of the imagination. How can we imagine our situation or our history if we think we are superior to it?

There is the Territory of despair, where it is assumed that what is objectionable is "inevitable," and so there too the essential work is neglected. How can we have something better if we do not imagine it? How can we imagine it if we do not hope for it? How can we hope for it if we do not attempt it?

There is the Territory of the national or the global point of view, in which one does not pay attention to anything in particular. Akin to that, is the Territory of abstraction, a regionalism of the mind. This territory originally belonged to philosophers, mathematicians, economists, tank thinkers, and the like, but now some claims are being staked out in it for literature. At a meeting in honor of *The Southern Review*, held in the fall of 1985 at Baton Rouge, one of the needs identified,

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according to an article in *The New York Times Book Review*,[1] was "to redefine Southernness without resort to geography." If the participants all agreed on any one thing, the article concluded,

> it is perhaps that accepted definitions of regionalism have been unnecessarily self-limiting up to now. The gradual disappearance of the traditional, material South does not mean that Southernness is disappearing, any more than blackness is threatened by integration, or sacredness by secularization. If anything, these metaregions . . . , based as they are upon values, achieve distinction in direct proportion to the homogenization of the physical world. By coming to terms with a concept of regionalism that is no longer based on geographical or material considerations, *The Southern Review* is sidestepping those forces that would organize the world around an unnatural consensus.

Parts of that statement are not comprehensible. Blackness, I would think, *would* be threatened by integration, and sacredness by secularization; dilution at least is certainly implied in both instances. We might as well say that fire is a state of mind and thus is not threatened by water. And how might blackness and sacredness, which have never been regions, be "metaregions"? And is the natural world subject to limitless homogenization? There are, after all, southern species of plants and animals that will not thrive in the north, and vice versa.

This "metaregion," at any rate, this region "without resort to geography," is a map without a territory, which is to say a map impossible to correct, a map subject to become fantastical and silly like that Southern chivalry-of-the-mind that Mark Twain so properly condemned. How this "metaregion" could resist homogenization and "unnatural consensus" is not clear. At any rate, it abandons the real region to the homogenizers: You just homogenize all you want to, and we will sit here being Southern in our minds.

And akin to that, in turn, is the Territory of artistic primacy or autonomy, in which it is assumed that no value is inherent in subjects, but that value is conferred upon subjects by

[1] Mark K. Stengel, "Modernism on the Mississippi: *The Southern Review* 1935-85," *The New York Times Book Review*, November 24, 1985, pp. 3 and 35.

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the art and the attention of the artist. The subjects of the world are only "raw material." As William Matthews writes in a recent article:[2] "A poet beginning to make something needs raw material, something to transform." For Marianne Moore, he says,

> subject matter is not in itself important, except that it gives her the opportunity to speak about something that engages her passions. What is important instead is what she can discover to say.

And he concludes:

> It is not, of course, the subject that is or isn't dull, but the quality of attention we do or do not pay to it, and the strength of our will to transform. Dull subjects are those we have failed.

This apparently assumes that for the animals and humans who are not fine artists, who have discovered nothing to say, the world is dull, which of course is not true. It assumes also that attention is of interest in itself, which is not true either.

In fact, attention is of value only insofar as it is paid in the proper discharge of an obligation. To pay attention is to come into the presence of a subject. In one of its root senses, it is to "stretch toward" a subject, in a kind of aspiration. We speak of "paying attention" because of a correct perception that attention is *owed*—that, without our attention and our attending, our subjects, including ourselves, are endangered.

Mr. Matthews' trivializing of subjects in the interest of poetry industrializes the art. He is talking about an art oriented exclusively to production, like coal mining. Like an industrial entrepreneur, he regards the places and creatures and experiences of the world as "raw material," valueless until exploited.

The test of imagination, ultimately, is not the territory of art or the territory of the mind, but the territory underfoot. That is not to say that there is no territory of art or of the mind, but only that it is not a separate territory. It is not exempt either from the principles above it or from the country below it. It is a territory, then, that is subject to correction—by, among other things, paying attention. To remove it from

[2] William Matthews, "Dull Subjects," *New England Review and Bread Loaf Quarterly*, Winter 1985, pp. 142-152.

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the possibility of correction is finally to destroy art and thought, and the territory underfoot as well.

Memory, for instance, must be a pattern upon the actual country, not a cluster of relics in a museum or a written history. What Barry Lopez, following Yi-Fu Tuan, calls "the invisible landscape" of communal association and usage must serve the visible as a guide and as a protector; the visible landscape must verify and correct the invisible. The invisible landscape, alone, becomes false, sentimental, and useless, just as the visible landscape, alone, becomes a strange land, threatening to humans and vulnerable to human abuse.

To assume that the context of literature is "the literary world" is, I believe, simply wrong. That its real habitat is the household and the community—that it can and does affect, and in practical ways, the life of a place—may not be recognized by most theorists and critics for a while yet. But they will finally come to it, because finally they will have to. And when they do, they will renew the study of literature and restore it to importance.

Emerson, in "The American Scholar," worrying about the increasing specialization of human enterprises, thought that the individual, to be whole, "must sometimes return from his own labor to embrace all the other laborers"—a solution that he acknowledged to be impossible. The result, he saw, was that "Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things." The solution that he apparently did think possible was a return out of specialization and separateness to the human definition, so that a thinker or scholar would not be a "mere thinker," a thinking specialist, but "Man Thinking." But this return is not meant to be a retreat into abstraction, for Emerson understood "Man Thinking" as a thinker committed to action: "Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential. Without it, he is not yet man."

And action, of course, implies place and community. There can be disembodied thought, but not disembodied action. Action, embodied thought, requires local and communal reference. To act, in short, is to live. Living "is a total act. Thinking is a partial act." And one does not live alone. Living is a communal act, whether or not its communality is acknowledged. And so Emerson writes:

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> I grasp the hands of those next me, and take my place in the ring to suffer and to work, taught by an instinct, that so shall the dumb abyss be vocal with speech.

Emerson's spiritual heroism can sometimes be questionable or tiresome, but he can also write splendidly accurate, exacting sentences, and that is one of them. We see how it legislates against what we now call "groupiness"; neighborhood is a given condition, not a contrived one; he is not talking about a "planned community" or a "network," but about the necessary interdependence of those who are "next" to each other. We see how it invokes dance, acting in concert, as a metaphor of almost limitless reference. We see how the phrase "to suffer and to work" refuses sentimentalization. We see how common work, common suffering, and a common willingness to join and belong are understood as the conditions upon which speech is possible in "the dumb abyss" in which we are divided.

This leads us, probably, to as good a definition of the beloved community as we can hope for: common experience and common effort on a common ground to which one willingly belongs. The life of such a community has been very little regarded in American literature. Our writers have been much concerned with the individual who is misunderstood or mistreated by a community that is in no sense beloved, as in *The Scarlet Letter*. From Thoreau to Hemingway and his successors, a great deal of sympathy and interest has been given to the individual as pariah or gadfly or exile. In Faulkner, a community is the subject, but it is a community disintegrating as it was doomed to do by the original sins of land greed, violent honor, and slavery. There are in Faulkner some characters who keep alive the hope of community, or at least the fundamental decencies on which community depends, and in Faulkner, as in Mark Twain, these are chiefly women: Dilsey, Lena Grove, the properly outraged Mrs. Littlejohn.

The one American book, that I know, that is about a beloved community—a settled, established white American community with a sustaining common culture, and mostly beneficent toward both its members and its place—is Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. The community that the book describes, the coastal village of Dunnet, Maine, and

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the neighboring islands and back country, is an endangered species on the book's own evidence: a lot of its characters are old and childless, without heirs or successors—and with the twentieth century ahead of it, it could not last. But though we see it in its last days, we see it whole.

We see it whole, I think, because we see it both in its time and in its timelessness. The centerpiece of the book, the Bowden family reunion, is described in the particularity of a present act, but it is perceived also, as such an event must be, as a reenactment; to see is to remember:

> There was a wide path mowed for us across the field, and, as we moved along, the birds flew up out of the thick second crop of clover, and the bees hummed as if it still were June. There was a flashing of white gulls over the water where the fleet of boats rode the low waves together in the cove, swaying their small masts as if they kept time to our steps. The plash of the water could be heard faintly, yet still be heard; we might have been a company of ancient Greeks . . .

Thus, though it precisely renders its place and time, the book never subsides into the flimsy contemporaneity of "local color."

The narrator of the book is one who departs and returns, and her returns are homecomings—to herself as well as to the place:

> . . . the first salt wind from the east, the first sight of a lighthouse set boldly on its outer rock, the flash of a gull, the waiting procession of seaward-bound firs on an island, made me feel solid and definite again, instead of a poor incoherent being. Life was resumed, and anxious living blew away as if it had not been. I could not breathe deep enough or long enough. It was a return to happiness.

Anyone acquainted with the sentimentalities of American regionalism will look on that word "happiness" with suspicion. But here it is not sentimental, for the work and suffering of the community are fully faced and acknowledged. The narrator's return is not to an idyll of the boondocks; it is a reentrance into Emerson's "ring." The community is happy in that it has survived its remembered tragedies, has reshaped itself

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coherently around its known losses, has included kindly its eccentrics, invalids, oddities, and even its one would-be-exile. The wonderful heroine of the book, and its emblem, Mrs. Elmira Todd, a childless widow, who in her youth "had loved one who was far above her," is a healer—a grower, gatherer, and dispenser of medicinal herbs.

She is also a dispenser of intelligent talk about her kinfolk and neighbors. More than any book I know, this one makes its way by conversation, engrossing exchanges of talk in which Mrs. Todd and many others reveal to the narrator their life and history and geography. And perhaps the great cultural insight of the book is stated by Mrs. Todd:

> Conversation's got to have some root in the past, or else you've got to explain every remark you make, an' it wears a person out.

The conversation wells up out of memory, and in a sense *is* the community, the presence of its past and its hope, speaking in the dumb abyss.

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JOHN P. SISK

The Devil and American Epic

I

Towards the end of his fine essay "The Englishness of English Literature" in the Winter 1983 *Daedalus*, the British scholar Peter Conrad contrasts English and American literature. He argues that "The characteristic gesture of English literature seems to be renunciation or wearied defeat" so that "its recurrent mode is pastoral; its recurrent mood is elegiac." America, however, "has always seen its destiny as epic" and therefore "has an unmisgivingly epic literature" that assumes as "its obligation the integration of a vast, uncharted national territory." One does not find in it the literal or symbolic "surrender of weapons" that marks the greatest English writers—Chaucer, for instance, with his nostalgic Wife of Bath, Shakespeare with John of Gaunt and Richard II, Milton with *Paradise Regained*, Wordsworth with *The Prelude*, Orwell with *Down and Out in Paris and London*.

Conrad's paradoxical thesis was on my mind one cold and wet London morning as I passed through Trafalgar Square heading once more for the National Portrait Gallery. High on his column, Admiral Nelson was obviously a man who would surrender no weapons, even if in the process of making that clear he had to surrender an arm and an eye. He suggests an epic destiny as much as the statue of Napoleon does on top of his column in the Place Vendôme in Paris. In such company the band of fundamentalist anti-nuclear singers below him among the pigeons and the couchant bronze lions seemed utterly irrelevant.

They seemed no less irrelevant in the wonderful Portrait Gallery where—at least for an Anglophile American—the aura is celebrational rather than elegiac or pastoral. Who looks more epic than Queen Elizabeth I, or Sir Walter Raleigh, or Drake, or Mountbatten, or Kitchener, or Edward

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VII—known as "The Peacemaker" but here arrayed in gorgeous military regalia? Even his father, Prince Albert, booted and spurred, right hand resolutely on sword, appears capable of leading a second and successful charge of the Light Brigade. In such company Sir Oswald Moseley and the Beatles become part of the epic of England no less than Humphrey Bogart, who is posed beside Winston Churchill.

Wearied defeat indeed! Here if anywhere is a place to make one wonder if Professor Conrad isn't forgetting the extent to which twentieth-century American writers take a critical if not skeptical and downright disillusioned view of the epic strain in American culture: Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, Eugene O'Neill, Thomas Wolfe, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, E.E. Cummings, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald before World War II; Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller, Tennessee Williams, Philip Roth, Donald Barthelme, E.L. Doctorow, Robert Coover, and Thomas Pynchon after it. Where in such writers does one find the heroic elevation of character and language, the narrative sweep, the confident and optimistic concern with events crucial to national destiny that are characteristic of epic?

But over the North Atlantic, sunk in the doldrums of the long flight back to the New World that a not especially epic movie did little to alleviate, it became possible to see that Conrad might have a point. Americans so far have had no difficulty sounding epically American in their very skepticism about or enraged disillusion with epical promises and expectations. Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and Coover's *The Public Burning* are as much in the tradition of American epic as *Moby Dick* and *Leaves of Grass*. As Daniel Aaron makes clear in *Writers on the Left* and Paul Hollander in *Political Pilgrims*, many of those American writers who in the thirties and early forties became communists or fellow travelers managed to sound epically American, and even saw themselves as carrying the Declaration of Independence to its logical conclusion. Mike Gold, editor of *The New Masses* and the party's "critical hatchetman," as Richard Hofstadter has called him, was the sort of person who had he lived in another century might have earned himself a place in the American pantheon of leg-

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endary intransigents alongside Tom Paine, Samuel Adams, and Thoreau. Gold surely would have understood Ahab's epic need in *Moby Dick* to surrender no weapons as he elevates the hated white whale to the status of what Ishmael calls an "intolerable allegory."

II

The problem is that in America the epic impulse has a way of disguising itself as anti-epic. This interdependence of what appear to be separate impulses was made clear in two noteworthy 1983 television specials—*The Winds of War*, the eighteen-hour version of Herman Wouk's novel, and the two-and-a-half hour finale of *MASH*.

In the first of these Commander Pug Henry would have recognized Ahab and Mike Gold as fanatic anticipations of persons with whom his position as naval attaché in Hitler's Berlin had made him all too familiar, even if he would have been reluctant to dignify them with the term "epic." The dimensions of the action in which he plays a central role are, of course, unabashedly epic. He is a thoroughly reliable superachiever in a typical modern crisis situation: one characterized by sharply conflicting points of view, an overload of information coming from widely separated points of origin, and dangerous accumulations of power combined with uncertainty about the intentions behind that power.

Henry's heroic connections are Virgilian rather than Homeric: his country's welfare comes first, his reason controls his passions, he is not defective in learning, he keeps the key issues of his world in perspective, he understands the relevant technology, he talks German to the Germans and Russian to the Russians. He is, besides, a concerned and understanding father and, under testing circumstances, a loyal husband. In short, he combines a capacity for unconditional commitment with knowingness, irony, and flexibility that suggests Shakespeare's Henry V, especially the Henry V whom Laurence Olivier presented immediately after World War II, when both British and American audiences were inclined to see a connection between their recent victory and the leadership quali-

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ties displayed by a young king who would have scorned the renunciations of wearied defeat as categorically as would Captain Kirk of *Star Trek* or Chuck Yeager, the test pilot hero of Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff*.

But if all this added up to a very attractive kind of modern epic hero for much of the TV audience, there were many who found Commander Henry at times embarrassing and even a cause of uneasiness. Harry F. Waters in *Newsweek*, for instance, was not about to take Pug Henry on Herman Wouk's evaluation. Unable to forget Robert Mitchum in his other personae, he wrote that the actor is "cast totally against type—and therein lies the power of his performance." For the "normally Bad Bob plays the quintessentially noble warrior," and his "inimitable, drowsy-lidded eyes" constantly signaled to Waters that Mitchum was aware of this gamesome paradox. His performance therefore "sets up a tension between actor and character that never ceases to intrigue."

In such a reading of *The Winds of War* the viewer is protected from the threat of the embarrassment of epic by proposing the possibility of behind-the-scenes anti-epic. It suggests a way of living with, even enjoying within limits, a kind of hero who if we took him seriously would place on us an uncomfortable burden of heroic emulation. Imagine the burden of taking seriously, as Wouk apparently intends us to, Pug Henry's words in his moment of erotic temptation: "I'm a family man . . . I'm a one woman man . . . and I've got a war to fight." In Waters' "subtle" and anti-epic reading this is "righteous drivel," and Mitchum is to be commended for bringing it off with a straight face. It is all too easy to imagine Waters' reaction if he were standing in front of Edward VII in the National Portrait Gallery.

It is also easy to imagine the reaction of Wolfe's test pilots and astronauts to Pug Henry, who would present them with the same disturbing paradox that John Glenn did: Henry appears to have the right stuff in spite of the fact that he has the wrong language, which means that he has the wrong style. In the American anthology of heroics this generally means that the stuff itself is less than genuine. The language of the right stuff, whether employed by fighter jocks, cowboys, hipsters, nightclub comics, or athletic superstars, is de-

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fined against the righteous drivel of all the non-elect others (politicians, government officials, the media, and the wildly cheering general public) who attempt to appropriate the right stuff by celebrating it. In them the vision of the right stuff inspires epic enthusiasms to which the inspirers must react in anti-epic style or lose their integrity. The day when the hero could frankly acknowledge his achievement, even boast about it, is long past. An heir to the post-romantic disjunction between language and action, the possessor of the right stuff is suspicious of language and therefore anti-political. Like Frederic Henry in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, he is always being embarrassed by the righteous drivel of the old noble words. His position is that of those modern poets whose overriding concern is not to sound too poetical while winning a National Book Award or a Pulitzer Prize.

There was nothing subtle about the anti-epic of the two-and-a-half hour finale of *MASH* that followed shortly after *The Winds of War*. A good deal of the appeal of *MASH* throughout its eleven-year history has depended on its assumption that the conventional rhetoric of war is all righteous drivel. Its spirit, to use Peter Conrad's term, is that of the surrender of weapons, and its method of attack, as is so often the case in American anti-epic, is humor. This is a place for Falstaff, not Henry V; the latter has humor enough but, as he demonstrates in his great St. Crispin's Day speech before the battle of Agincourt, he is too inclined to the kind of righteous drivel that encourages a shouldering of arms. For Wolfe's fighter jocks the Korean War is the best place at the time to display the right stuff as they experience the *joie de combat*. For *MASH*, however, the Korean War, and by extension all war, is irrational, destructive, dehumanizing, and ludicrously ensnarled in the cross purposes of its own operation. This being the case, the 4077th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital is fortunately situated: devoted humanely to repairing the violent effects of war, it can see war for what it is without endorsing what it is. It is apparently committed to the conviction that if both sides would surrender weapons all parties could go home and resume the good life.

But the irony is that when this conviction is dramatized over an eleven-year period anti-epic becomes itself a kind of

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epic with its own righteous drivel, not a little of which derives from the series' behind-the-scenes involvement with Vietnam, Watergate, and the human potential movement. Waters, to judge from his *Newsweek* story about the *MASH* finale, missed this dimension. He took no note of the extent to which the program, by dramatizing the symbiotic relationship between war and comradeship, takes a benign view of war and at the same time represents the army as a place of adventure and discovery. There is a moment in the wrap-up episode when Colonel Potter speaks of going home at last to tend his garden. If one were inclined to look as critically at him as Waters looks at Pug Henry one might see in the Colonel's eyes (or should we say, in actor Harry Morgan's eyes?) a contradictory awareness that going home to the garden is going to be a sad comedown, that after a life of anti-epic elevation domestic peace and small-scale horticulture will probably be a bore.

Many viewers apparently believed that the wrap-up episode devoted too much time to the good-byes, but given the under-theme of attachment to the army and the war, the emphasis on the good-byes was right. The members of the 4077th had discovered one another as comrades in service of a self-transcending cause, and after such an experience the surrender of the weapons of their service signalized a point of no return. This is why veterans continue to congregate in celebration of "their" war—why, for instance, 30,000 veterans assembled in Normandy to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the D-day invasion—and why so many of them, without thinking of themselves as war lovers, are suspicious of pacifist attacks (themselves often quite warlike) on the armed forces. No doubt too this is why reruns of *MASH* continued to be so popular: the faithful didn't want to let go of their anti-war war.

III

Stephen Crane, like so many Americans who write interestingly about war, is easily put in the anti-war and anti-epic category. Who does not remember the bitter irony of the poem that begins, "Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind"? Early in

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The Red Badge of Courage it is clear that the traditional and epic rhetoric of war is righteous drivel, and war itself, as Tolstoy and *MASH* agree, chaotic, meaningless, and unnecessary—except that in the novel it is also a vale of soul-making for some of those caught up in it. In Crane's other great "war" story, "The Open Boat," the enemy against which four shipwrecked men in a ten-foot dinghy must battle for their lives is again what appears to be a "flatly indifferent" nature. Nevertheless, the central character, the correspondent "who had been taught to be cynical of men," knows even at the time that the experience of comradeship in adversity "is the best experience of his life." Not only that, but at the end the three survivors know themselves to be an elite of interpreters of the great sea's voice. So nature has not been so flatly indifferent after all, and war really has been kind after its fashion.

"The Open Boat" is the story of an epical encounter of the human spirit with an elemental force, and the four men display familiar heroic characteristics. At the same time they are Americans, so like characters in *MASH*, or like Tom Wolfe's fighter jocks, they use humor and irony as survival techniques; if they did not they would quickly go under. They are saved by style, as heroes generally are. But this is only so if you refuse to think of Crane as a Zolaesque kind of naturalist for whom the individual is completely determined by environment. Insofar as he is such a naturalist there is no room for epic or heroic in his story, and no place for nature conceived as an unsentimental teacher whose reiterated lesson is the interdependence of suffering and insight. If forces over which they have no control govern their thinking and conduct, Pug Henry of *Winds* and Hawkeye of *MASH* are figures upon whom a flatly indifferent fate is playing a practical joke, and then the question is whether the authors who claim to perceive the joke are not having a joke played on them by a jokester beyond their ken. Certainly Crane did not think of himself in such depreciatory terms. For him the true writer was one who has chosen to shoulder arms in the good cause of opposing the forces of incoherence. According to his friend Joseph Conrad, he had many of the qualities of the old style hero, including "a strain of chivalry which made him safe to trust with one's life." Nevertheless, given the difficul-

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ties human beings get into once they take seriously what may turn out to be only the righteous drivel of the epic and the heroic, it is not hard to understand the appeal of the skeptics and relativists who have been replacing the old-fashioned author as believable interpreters of experience.

Of course, this is not the way it is with Waters and the authors of *Winds* and *MASH*: all agree that Americans at least can have a significant degree of control over their lives, which is the indispensable assumption of both epic and anti-epic. In *MASH* those who are responsible for shouldering arms are responsible for their bellicose conduct; if they were not, the anti-establishment virtue of Hawkeye and his friends would be undercut. And certainly in Waters' view Pug Henry, for all his righteous drivel, is no mere prisoner of circumstance; if he were, the virtue of the war against Hitler, at least as it is represented in the film, would be undercut—and there is good reason to believe that Waters does not want to go that far. Even Robert Mitchum is to be commended for being enough of his own man to resist being completely determined by his role. But then the self-invalidating capacity of naturalism has always limited its usefulness for the practicing critic; it forces him to surrender too many weapons, particularly the weapon of moral judgment.

Waters does not surrender this weapon in his attack on television itself, which in his view comes off a sad second best when measured against the virtues of *MASH*, its own creation. He is as hard on the "plastic-phony" networks as Mike Gold was on Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* for its mistake of not seeing the Spanish Civil War as a Marxist melodrama. Waters quotes with approval *MASH* producer Gene Reynolds: market research "usually says eliminate the pain. But you have to put the viewers through pain, conflict and obstacles. They have to go down the hero's thorny road to feel triumph in the end." If Alan Alda, Reynolds, and writer Larry Gelbert hadn't been willing to go down this hero's road, refusing to surrender weapons in defense of the integrity of their program, the CBS brass would have put into effect disastrous changes. In short, authentic anti-epic demands old style heroics and the willingness to run the risk of righteous drivel.

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IV

The corollary one may infer is that any human effort in the direction of peace that defines the will to power as nothing but an aberration, as a perverse refusal to surrender weapons, is doomed to futility. And indeed, the American's uneasiness with his historical impulse to epic is in great part an uneasiness about power: power after the Civil War as a corrupt exploitation of national resources; power in the 1930s as a capitalistic prelude to fascism; power since World War II as nuclear energy, the latter now having become the intolerable allegory that the white whale was to Melville's Ahab. Power is what the bullies have; perhaps if we get rid of or forswear power the bullies will be no more—with the implication, perhaps, that we will then all be peaceful and happy little guys together. And those who give up on power must begin to take the idea of utopia seriously or fall into despair. They can expect to get little comfort from programs like *MASH*, which in the process of appearing anti-epic will be as much in love with power as with utopia. For utopia itself, unless we believe that it will happen automatically without any shouldering of arms against its adversaries, is a power-accumulating idea with its own epic potential. It is this fact that has led Ernest Lee Tuveson in *Redeemer Nation* to call attention to the resemblance between nineteenth-century American Millenarianism and Marxism, both of which, for all their historical determinism, see the approach to a grand end of things as "a continuing conflict between a monstrous 'conspiracy' and the party of the innocent and oppressed."

Huckleberry Finn's picaresque journey down the Mississippi River, the efforts of a little guy to disentangle himself from the corruptions of civilization, brilliantly dramatizes the American's uneasiness with power and the epic compulsions of his culture. Because Huck discovers comradeship while rejecting the combination of money and power so important to the standard American epic enterprise, Twain's novel is, like *MASH*, anti-epic. The Duke and the Dauphin (farcical repetitions of the Gilded Age predator's insatiable appetite for money and power) advance the cause of anti-epic as their grandiose schemes end in pratfall. Epic is further undercut

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by the numerous deflations of Old World aristocratic and chivalric conventions, and especially by Tom Sawyer's own grandiose schemes—at the beginning of the novel as the quixotic leader of his Gang, and at the end as the entrepreneur behind the elaborate and romantic plan to free the already manumitted Jim. As he later tells his Aunt Polly, who cannot understand his motivation, "I wanted the adventure of it," and for that adventure he would have "waded neck-deep in blood." It is obvious that Huck with his "natural" conscience would not have used power so inhumanely. With the reader's approval, then, he can contemplate lighting out for the utopia of the Territory, where, free from the righteous drivel of civilization and the life-denying nag of its conscience, he can safely surrender all weapons.

In Tom Sawyer's version of epic, as in Mike Gold's, the grandiose idea is everything. He is himself an "author" in competition with the author of the larger work of which he is a part, and he is just as autocratic as authors generally are. His "novel" mandates the shouldering of all possible weapons and the reduction of all persons to means. His boyish entrepreneurship may amuse us, but insofar as we are individuals cherishing our own ends it is Huck's skepticism that we are more likely to sympathize with. One may believe that Commander Pug Henry, with his experience in pre-World War II Europe, would recognize in Tom the totalitarian's desire for a complete control of a reality, but it is no harder to believe that *MASH*'s Hawkeye would see in him an attractive candidate for service in the 4077th, where his talent for turning the daily humdrum into captivating escapades would be a surefire guarantee against boredom.

But neither of these possibilities should distract us from the fact that Tom as an ingenious and ruthless organizer of available power represents in the context of Twain's comedy the threat of technology just as much as does Melville's Ahab, who is no less a reducer of persons to means. It is technology in the dimension of adolescent epic adventure, however, that is especially threatening to any hopes of enjoying the utopian delights in the Territory or anywhere else, since Tom's technology implies that the pursuit of those delights can only en-

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tail another, and most likely, arduous adventure. This is why so much space has to be devoted at the end of the novel to the freeing of the already freed Jim.

Numerous critics have been unhappy with this escapade. Stephen Crane thought it absurd. In *The Green Hills of Africa* Hemingway says that if you read the novel "you must stop where the Nigger Jim is stolen from the boys. This is the real end. The rest is just cheating." But Tom is too important a character to be disposed of this highhandedly. William Van O'Connor has identified Tom as the Practical Joker of American literature. Tom, however, is not joking; he is dead serious, which is what makes him so menacing and is why he must be brought back at the end and displayed for what he is. This is not to say that by so displaying him his creator has found a way to be at ease with technological power. Twain seems to have remained as ambivalent about technological power as most Americans. Indeed, he was as ambivalent about it as Wolfe's astronauts, who even while they are being glorified through an epical concentration of technological power have to live with the fact that they are only NASA's controlled minions, not full-fledged fighter jocks like Chuck Yeager. The likely thing, in fact, is that Twain would have sympathized with the West German Greens in their pastoral vision of a pre-industrial and non-nuclear life.

In our national life the adult analogues to Tom's grandiose schemes are those instances of "technological heroism" that Peter Conrad sees mirrored in our literature, whose epics "covet the status of grand industrial projects, bridging space and abbreviating time, engineering things into semblance of unison." The very language here suggests Twain's golden expectations for the Paige typesetting machine. One thinks of Whitman's "Passage to India" with its celebration of the "Rondure of the world" as a consequence of the technological heroism of the Union Pacific Railroad, the Atlantic cable, and the Suez Canal—to say nothing of the hundred-year-old Brooklyn Bridge and the moon-landing of the astronauts, those fabulous examples of the American's metaphoric ability to bring together the distantly separated. Nevertheless, to live in America and in its literature is to hear behind Conrad's

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words the voice of the American's recurrent doubts not only about the uses to which his power is being put but about the goodness of that power itself.

V

Twain had lost faith in the goodness of technological power when in a time of financial disaster he came to write *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Here the Yankee, miraculously time-warped back to sixth-century Camelot, frequently suggests Tom Sawyer as he employs the marvels of modern technology in an apparent epic attempt to civilize England—which is just as reluctant to be civilized as Huck Finn is. Ultimately the Yankee and his few converts are unable to withstand the combined forces of the Church and the entrenched feudal order, and both parties, having shouldered all available arms, go down in a final bloody battle. The Yankee's enterprise would have been no less futile if the Duke and the Dauphin had been recruited out of *Huckleberry Finn* to manage it. Given the novel's dim view of the British aristocracy, it is unlikely that it was a subject of conversation when Twain, in England in 1907 to receive his honorary Oxford degree, chatted with that aristocratic peacemaker, Edward VII.

A Connecticut Yankee is generally thought of as satire, but the question is the target of the satire. The late Maxwell Geismar, writing anti-epically out of the liberational euphoria of the 1960s, sees Twain as an American prophet who in an admittedly uneven novel still brings off a powerful attack on the follies and corruptions of America and Europe, past and present. But no satirist can be successful when he is as uncertain as Twain was at this point in his career about so many fundamental issues. In particular, he cannot make up his mind whether anybody can be guilty of anything since it is doubtful whether anybody can resist the combined forces of selfishness and environment. This is a damaging uncertainty if the novel is really trying to satirize an attempt to create a new human being and a new society by means of technological power.

Epic, anti-epic, and satire have in common the possibility that somebody can be guilty of something. This possibility

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may appear to be non-existent in Twain's subsequent essay "What is Man?" in which, as in so much of his later unpublished work, free will is an illusion, human motivation is unqualifiedly selfish, and nature is not flatly indifferent but universally malevolent. Human beings, even Shakespeare, are only machines, which most of the time (like the accursed Paige typesetter?) don't even function very well. Unlike B.F. Skinner in his own anti-epic essay "What is Man?", Twain has no confidence that the right contingencies of reinforcement would make the situation any better. Whether humans shoulder arms, surrender arms, or beat their arms into ploughshares, they will probably make a mess of things. Indeed, Twain places even less value on the righteous drivel of autonomy, freedom and dignity than Skinner does.

Nevertheless, Twain remains always the outraged moralist for whom the idea of a guiltless universe is intolerable. As his famous "War Prayer" (his complete rejection of the spirit of Shakespeare's Henry V) makes clear, the irrational and violent conduct of the "damned human race" is the responsibility of the religious spirit and its perversions of conscience. In other and equally characteristic moments (when in effect he is prophesying the anti-establishmentarian anti-epic of the 1960s) he is just as capable of approving the most violent revolutionary conduct in pursuit of his own pieties. At such moments he does not simply demand justice; he wants justice as Hamlet wants it—in the form of adequate revenge. If, for instance, the atrocious Czarist government can only be overthrown by dynamite, "then," he says, "thank God for dynamite." Somebody must be guilty of something.

Both epic and anti-epic are characterized by a unifying point of view with respect to the use of power. One consequence of Twain's bafflement in his very American search for such a point of view is his romance with the Devil—explicit in *Letters from the Earth* but clear enough in published and unpublished work during and after his dark period. The Protestantism of Twain's background was itself quite capable of supplying an epic and even, as we see in American Millennialism, a utopian perspective, to which the inevitable counterperspective was that of the Devil. The interdependence of the two—a staple now in the TV evangelism of Jimmy Lee Swag-

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gart—is made brilliantly clear in Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown." Here Goodman Brown walks into the forest where he encounters (or perhaps only dreams that he encounters) a community of apostate New England Calvinists that has gathered to attend a black mass presided over by the Devil. The latter gives his congregation this sadistic and reductionist message:

> Depending upon one another's hearts, ye had still hoped that virtue were not all a dream. Now are ye undeceived! Evil is the nature of mankind. Evil must be your only happiness. Welcome again, my children, to the communion of your race!

The congregation reacts with a cry "of despair and triumph"—despair because of the lost establishment perspective, triumph because of the conscience-liberating new perspective. That the Devil's words are epistemological nonsense (if everything is evil then nothing is evil) is not apparent because the congregation has replaced one unquestioning faith with another. They are in the Devil's bag, recruits for his own ongoing anti-epic contest with the establishment God, just as Jimmy Lee Swaggart might have predicted.

It is not likely that Twain would have shared Swaggart's unquestioning faith in the existence of the Devil—or of God either, for that matter. Both figures, however, seem to have been for him necessary fictions without which reality lacked a critical framework. In any event, it is not hard to see the attractiveness of the Devil's perspective to a bedeviled Twain: it promises an absolute fix-point for the liberating discovery of illusion, just as that "author" figure Iago does in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Even if the right stuff is always the worst stuff and the human race is damned, it can at least know the truth about the damnation it is incapable of resisting. Even if the truth is that all truths are equal, and therefore equally deconstructible, so that the attempt to distinguish between dreaming and waking is the ultimate folly, one can at least be dogmatically certain about that and so have the comfort of standing on solid ground after all. In the meantime, the Devil cunningly sows confusion in humans' efforts to conduct their affairs by making it possible for any establishment to identify its critics, whether friendly or unfriendly, as diabolically motivated.

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In the satanic creed the language of all epic perspectives is righteous drivel—which is of course ultimately true of the language of all anti-epic perspectives as well, since any perspective is a way of hiding from the absolute truth. Only the Devil is beyond mere perspective. It is Goodman Brown's bad luck—and perhaps ultimately Twain's as well—that he is denied the peace of mind that is the bonus of this creedal position. Brown does not belong to the Devil's community, he is only demoralized by the knowledge of its certainties; he knows the despair, not the triumph; for even if the experience was only a dream it "was a dream of evil omen"—one of those Yeatsian dreams in which reality begins. Thus Brown is a useful hyperbolic indicator of the American's painful ambivalence about the use of available power (including the power of language), whether to thrive or survive. So Brown comes back to Salem utterly disillusioned, having surrendered all weapons—pretty much as Twain once planned to bring an older Huck and Tom back to Hannibal, Missouri. This means that Brown is so morally neutralized that he continues to do the Devil's work by offering no opposition to it.

The Devil, sensitive as he is to time, place, and circumstance, always presents himself in the most acceptable form. In Hawthorne's story he comes on disguised as one of David Riesman's inside dopesters, since he promises his faithful the bonus of a penetration into "the deep mystery of sin, the fountain of all wicked arts," which are the source of all power. For him it is a customary disguise and a customary promise. The expectation of an enhanced life through participation in this power has always been the vital center of satanic cults, whether in medieval Europe, Puritan New England, or contemporary California. Thus even if, as Denis de Rougemont argues in *The Devil's Share*, the Devil's cleverest wile is to disguise himself as non-existent, his no less clever caper, given the temper of the times, may be to identify himself as coming from where the action is.

But at the same time this very American Devil reinforces his authority by presenting himself as an intransigently honest perfectionist ("his once angelic nature could yet mourn for our miserable race") for whom absolute evil begins wherever virtue is to any degree less than it might be, and for whom all human motivation is morally invalidated through

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contamination by power. In or out of Hawthorne's story he stands ironically above the turmoil of time and misguided effort, knowing that all hopes to close the gap between good and evil are illusionary and that all conduct, however apparently righteous, can be reduced to hypocrisy and cowardice and must therefore be rejected in the most idealistic terms. This is of course the rejection of a failed and invidious utopian who is shrewd enough to encourage the utopian dreams of others, knowing that they can only increase the sum of disillusionment in the world.

We may have reason to think of this familiar Devil as the archetypal revisionist who wants all the power for himself. Certainly, in his disguise as the square-shooting, plain-speaking, and utterly reliable bullshit-detector he is the formidable and morally indignant adversary of all human government, which in his categorical terms is nothing more than an attempt to monopolize power, and of all political activity, which is always selfishly manipulative and divisive. He is, in fact, the comforting idealization of our doubts about the worth of any effort to resist the entropic drift of things. The perfectionist Devil is, therefore, particularly hostile to democracy, which is committed to the belief that it is both necessary and good to strive for political power within the non-totalitarian guidelines of a constitution, even if the power is often abused, and good to ceremonialize its objectives and occasional epic achievements, even at the risk of righteous drivel.

This satanic opposition, high-minded as it is, is one reason why if Professor Conrad is right to recognize the American enterprise as epic it must also be recognized as a political and therefore uneasy epic, which is made particularly uneasy by an anti-political utopian bias. You cannot be a democrat and believe, as Jean-Paul Sartre apparently did to the end of his life, that elections are "a trap for fools." To believe this is to imply that the proper aim of the good society is to get beyond politics to a state of virtuous unanimity—such as Sartre and numerous fellow-travelers once believed to be the case in Soviet Russia. The perfectionist and totalitarian Devil, knowing how hard it is for humans to put up with disharmony, is of course a great propagandist for unity, though the unity he has in mind is the unity of a congregation for whom the fear of righteous drivel is the effective inhibitor of political conversation and therefore of all political action.

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Given all this, the irony is the willingness of Americans to believe that politics, as the folk singer Bob Dylan has put it, "is an instrument of the Devil." Twain would have agreed. Justin Kaplan in his *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain* refers to Twain's "lifelong contempt for politicians in general and Congressmen (the only 'distinctly American criminal class') in particular." His Yankee shares this bias as with high-minded duplicity he attempts to turn corrupt and backward Camelot into a Republic of Virtue uncontaminated by politics. "The country is the real thing, the substantial thing," he muses; "institutions are extraneous." Clearly, he is unaware that institutions are constituent of the country and depend, as does the country they constitute, on political action. Such political action is often, of course, just as corrupt and inclined to righteous drivel as Twain knew it to be. The problem is always how to keep the Devil from claiming the corruption as a validation of his own perfectionist demands and his own vision of a grand coming together of alienated and plain-talking souls. The problem, in other words, is how to keep the faith in circumstances where faithlessness is always trying to become a virtue.

Many of us are sufficiently infected by the habits of dialectical thinking to believe that the opposition between the epic impulse to glory in power and the anti-epic impulse to renounce power must, like the opposition between nature and nurture, point to some grand de-alienating reconciliation, in which Tom and Huck (joined perhaps by Pug Henry and Hawkeye) come together to establish the garden of America on a tension-free and non-epic basis. In the meantime, Freud being as usual a safer guide than Marx, we should probably expect to live with the discontents that derive from the tensions endemic to our democratic culture—prudently fortified by the well-grounded suspicion that the triumph of either impulse would be the Devil's delight. There seems to be some awareness of this possibility in the American public. If we were epically at ease with our power, if our epic and anti-epic impulses were not symbiotically joined, could *The Right Stuff* have become a best seller and *MASH* have lasted for eleven years?

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NIKKI STILLER

A Sad and Beautiful Film

In *Stranger than Paradise*, Jim Jarmusch's earlier film, a visiting Hungarian waif, her oddball American-born cousin, and his sidekick, a turf accountant named Eddie, set out on a peculiar American odyssey. Each frame bespeaks a spiritual bleakness as well as a material one, and a detachment from any culture as such. Whether in a bombed-out cityscape or an empty apartment where the TV is a blaring ikon, Jarmusch's poor players (literally card players) in their Hollywood sunglasses and porkpie hats are as out of context as moonfolk. The entire movie has been shot in brooding Eastern European black-and-white, and ruminates on the late twentieth-century question of displacement. The three wryly impassive characters abide in the shadow of society: resident aliens wherever they are. The film suggests that this country, stranger than Paradise, may be as grim as Prague on a winter day. Marginality, for Jarmusch, is a state of mind as well as a social condition: totally amoral, basically harmless, his people cheat, steal, and lie with such a perfect sense of entitlement that they appear innocent. Magicians of the marginal, they manage by sleight of hand: the slip of a girl brings one of the two men some cigarettes she has filched, and we marvel at how she has concealed the carton under her coat! Yet this youthful trio, for all its tricks and its restlessness, seems to lack the irrational energy, the heavyset self-esteem, of an elderly aunt who, in a game of cards with them, declares "I am de vinner!" She relishes her victory over Fate with as great a sense of her own importance as Henry Kissinger: she has survived against the odds. When the young people abandon her, however, although she curses them in two languages for their "American" selfishness, we realize that she has nothing to offer them either. While all four characters do connect with each other, their liaisons are based on need, not altruism: they would escape each other if they could.

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In *Down by Law*, Jarmusch returns to his particular imaginative province where Europe and America meet. This time, however, we are in New Orleans, a city which misfits have long sought out as a haven from the constrictions of the Puritan ethic. Or, to change the image, as a black prostitute recalls her mother telling her: "America is a melting pot. You bring the whole thing to a boil, and all the scum rises to the top." The converse, then, is that the beautiful souls sink to the bottom, where the blacks have been stuck all along. The film begins with a cinematic tour fit to make a travel agent go out of business. Jarmusch shows us a sky never free from clouds above roadside junkyards; graffiti and litter inside and out; shotgun houses blank as hangovers staring at the day; lone cabins on the bayou which seem to wait like the aging whores on the streetcorners for customers who never arrive; blacks in the projects all dressed up with no place to go. Yet in this desolate landscape there is much beauty: in the gazing eyes of the clocks, in the watchful faces on the beds next to them, in the graceful shutters of the shotgun houses; in the wistfulness of a "girl" about forty, sitting on a balcony in the early morning and "watching the light change." The rain, the river, the prehistoric bayous remain, and attest to the passage of Time, loved and mourned in New Orleans, perhaps the booziest and most poetic place in our culture, while the rest of America denies it.

Against this backdrop, we are introduced to each character separately. Jack Romano is a pimp who thinks he is on his way up. He lives with one of his prostitutes, a black woman, and has antagonized a fat, toothless Cajun hood. Despite his surname, Jack seems to have sprung from New Orleans' shadows; John Lurie's heavily sensual face tops a sinuous and graceful body. Both he and the black men in this film move like large jungle cats. But he is perfectly innocuous. Zack (Tom Waits) is a disc jockey who has drifted down from glamorous spots like Detroit and Cleveland; he has consistently subverted his career, such as it is, to the dismay of his girlfriend Lorette (Ellen Barkin) who finally throws him out at the beginning of the film. Creator of "The Lee Baby Sims Show," and indeed simian in appearance, Zack has a mellifluous speaking voice, and is given to singing blues like a black.

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He is smooth-talked into driving a car crosstown by a treacherous male masquerading as a friend. The police find Zack, and a corpse in the trunk of the car as well. Zack finds himself in Orleans Parish Prison. Into the same cell comes Jack, framed by the Cajun hood, who, pretending to present him with a "Cajun goddess" for his stable, has set him up in a motel room with a barely nubile girl. The film begins to jell when Roberto (Roberto Benigni) is thrown in with them. An Italian we have briefly met recording idioms in his pocket notebook—"It is a sad and beautiful world!" and "Buzz offa!" which he mistakes for a polite salutation—Roberto has actually killed a man, we learn later, though in self-defense. Roberto woos the two Americans, and, after he has won their friendship, proposes an escape he has culled from the American movies. The three succeed in their jailbreak only to lose their way in the bayou. Rather by luck, they make their way back to "civilization," a road, and then discover Luigi's Tintop restaurant where Roberto meets his true love. Leaving him there, the Americans start out on their separate trips down divergent—not different—paths.

Though the film sometimes seems like *Waiting for Godot* rewritten by Damon Runyon and enacted by the Marx Brothers, it is a highly original work. Its themes interconnect like the Louisiana waterways themselves: about mutability, survival, loss, comradeship, enterprise, and enmity, it is also about the role of language and imagination in helping us to break out of the prisons we find and make. More specifically, it is about the American male in contrast to the European one: his needs, his abilities, his good nature, his vitality, and his fears. Both Jack and Zack (can we tell the clowns apart in Beckett?) are failures with people: "The trouble with you, Jack," says the oracular black woman, "is that you don't understand people. And you don't understand women at all." David Denby among others has pointed out that the film is about the failure of males to bond, but this is not true of Roberto, who bonds very nicely, thank you, and also gets the girl. For *Down by Law* sends up the American frontier fantasy in a much subtler way than films such as *Midnight Cowboy*. Consider the locale: we are in the South, among the defeated, not in the West; in New Orleans, its cemeteries above

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ground, a constant *memento mori*; on the bayou that blurs boundaries of land and water, self and other, where boats and cars rest side by side. It is this ambiguous—amphibious?—territory that our friends must navigate. Water cultures entail cooperation. Absolute self-reliance is inappropriate in a canoe: as Jarmusch shows us, one person must paddle and the other watch out for the trees. The two Americans, prior to their misfortune, act according to our traditional cultural imperatives, although these imperatives, as Erik Erikson has argued, no longer apply. Their attitudes and occupations parody those of the cowboy. Zack rides figurative horses (he is a *disc jockey*), and Jack each night rounds up not the little doggies of the folk song but the women in his stable. Both men are concerned with appearances; their garb is decorative rather than functional. Zack tries to tame his curls with a hair net, and he loves his patent leather pumps, as crucial to his identity as boots to a cowboy: these shoes are the only possessions he salvages from Lorette when she throws him out. Jack flashes his pinky rings and sports the zoot suit of his profession. This rather effeminate mode of dress sets off the unsuitability of the characters' belief system even further. Both men believe, for example, that it is wrong to ask for help. Zack's girls pleads, "Why is it so hard for you to ask somebody for somethin'?" The reason is that his entire upbringing forbids it. While the women's eyes are literally wide open in this work—for the women see, and crudely speak, the truth—they cannot reach their men. For each man considers himself unique, self-sufficient, a law unto himself.

That the two are failures at carrying their code into practice endears them to us. Zack, for example, cannot "take care of" his girl. "All people want you to do," Lorette explains, "is for you to jerk them off a little." To this Zack responds with a certain kind of pride. "You know I don't jerk nobody off, baby." No one except himself, that is, and we never know if this is from choice or by default. Perhaps a bit of both. Neither Zack nor Jack is terribly aggressive although they think they would like to be. "How's the ladies treating you, Jack?" asks a black man in the Quarter, and advises him, if the "ladies" begin to be too much, to "Do like the crawfish and back on out of it." Constitutionally, these men resemble the craw-

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fish. While Jack thinks he is on his way up as a pimp, he is not vile enough for this enterprise. "A good pimp would have hit me by now," his girlfriend suggests at the end of her harangue. "You're not even a good pimp, Jack." "You sure can talk, can't you, baby?" says Jack. Their basic decency adds immeasurably to the characters' appeal; Jack and Zack are too feeling to be real operators. They do not have the requisite contempt for women, unlike the petty hood who, entering Jack's room, comments "She nice" to Zack as if the black woman were not there. It is Jack who gently tells her to "cover up the merchandise" upon Fatso's arrival, and who covers her as if she were a child. Zack refuses to hit Lorette even when she baits him to do so. They are by nature if not by role too playful to be macho. Both are infatuated with cars, for example. In prison, Jack dreams about a long white car picking him up upon his release; there will be "four naked girls inside and music playing." Zack, though he suspects the too-good-to-be-true offer of his supposed friend, succumbs to it because he is tempted to drive "a big fancy car," a Jaguar, for an hour. Both men are well-meaning—and ineffectual: Zack wears a tattoo of Lorette on his arm, but he cannot deal with her in reality. Jack's offer to protect the little Cajun (whose extreme youth is hidden from him) is far more credible than that of the slimy policeman who arrests him and offers to protect her also. Yet Jack has fallen for the rival hood's transparent ruse. In underestimating the opposition and in overestimating his own powers, he, too, cannot "take care of" himself. He, too, lands in jail.

The prison is full of those who cannot take care of themselves. Most of the inmates are black, lonesome, wistful; they look anything but violent. A perfect subclass, the camera hints, given to minor disorders, whose primitive drawings and graffiti adorn the walls of the cave. In a sense all these men have been framed. But when Zack asks the new arrival, "You don't think you're the only innocent asshole in here, do you?", Jack rejects the notion of a common humanity: "I don't want to have anything to do with you, man," he protests. "To me, you don't even exist." He waves Zack off as if to make him disappear. The two turn towards their bunks: on their backs ORLEANS PARISH PRISON, the identical

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stamp of the convict. "Sure," Zack mutters, "this prison doesn't exist either, these walls don't exist," and so forth. He recognizes that Jack's refusal to identify amounts to a denial of reality.

A few days later, Jack tries to make conversation, while Zack combs his beard in retaliatory silence. Each is surprised that the other can speak. Jack indulges in his white limousine fantasy which Zack admiringly calls "bullshit." Jack, wielding that classic American implement, the toothbrush (one can't speak while brushing one's teeth, after all) urges Zack to "Do a—you know—a thing—a—talk" upon finding out that Zack is a DJ. They entertain each other, Zack transforming the cell into a studio, and his cellmate into a celebrity. But both men distrust the verbal, expressive part of themselves, and they retreat into silence once more. Jack wraps himself in a blanket like a madman (poor Tom's a-cold?) and Zack obsessively chalks the primitive convict's calendar (𝐼 𝐼 𝐼 𝐼) on the wall. Jack orders him to stop; he doesn't, and they come to blows. There are two such fights in the film, at crucial moments when the men feel threatened and powerless. This combat seems to be the only kind of contact with which they are comfortable. We are sure they will not do each other much harm: their wrestling hold seems more of a hug than anything else. But we see that when frightened they turn not *to* each other but *on* each other.

Black and blue from their fight, the two sit on their bunks in glum silence until Roberto enters. It is Roberto, the pioneer of language and imagination, who has the resources that spring the men from prison and keep them alive in the wilderness. A distinct individual, he is also communal: he does not fear the others, and holds out his hand to them, yet it is he who winds up with the fairy-tale woman. It is he who speaks of poetry, of Whitman's *Leaves of Glass* (sic) and of "Bob" Frost, and is inspired by movies; nonetheless, he is a pragmatist. His visions are rooted in reality; "I like to catch—to dream—" he muses later in the film as he watches over a fire, and, like any artist, he is able to abide in doubts and ambiguities. Recalling his family, for example, he remembers his "very strange mother," both kind and cruel, as she first pampered, then slaughtered, a rabbit. Whereas Zack and Jack

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seem to have created themselves on "The Lee Baby Sims Show," Roberto has a history. The two Americans never speak of their past, and live either in a meaningless present or a hypothetical future. It is the European who is able to settle down with his past and to start a new life.

Though he has just cursed the guard who thrusts him into the cell, Roberto's face lights up when he sees his fellow convicts, as he recognizes, that is, others who are in the same predicament. His instinctual response is to introduce himself. "I ham Roberto," he announces, and then, to underscore his friendly intent, "Call me 'Bob'!" The two Americans remain impassive. No fool, Roberto sizes up the situation: "Iffa looks coulda keel, I would be a dead man now." He brightens, however, with an idea: to delve into his pocket for the notebook, and find *the right words*. He accompanies this tentative—"Not enough room to sweeng a cat!"—with an expressive semi-circular gesture. The Americans remain immobile. They steadfastly keep their backs to him. Later, Roberto, afflicted with hiccoughs, asks for a cigarette which, he claims, will cure him. Zack and Jack do not respond to his urgency; instead Jack bullies Roberto by insisting on the Italian telling the two names apart. Roberto's face registers his realization of what Jack is doing, and we see just this once in Roberto something like contempt. Since he believes the cigarette will help him, Roberto perseveres. Jack gives him a cigarette unwillingly ("Don't ask me again!"), but when Roberto requests "some fire" and Zack tells him no matches are allowed in prison, we recall Jack hollering "Guard! Guard! Guard!" to no avail when he wants a light. We see that Jack's perversity is nothing more than a symptom of his powerlessness. Accepting this, Roberto is undaunted. He persists in trying to talk to his comrades; focusing on them, he asks each why he was put in prison. His questions pry open their humanity. At last Zack, the more verbal of the two, teases, "And for what you were put in this prison, Bob?" While the Americans proclaim their innocence, Roberto astounds them by admitting that he has killed a man, in self-defense, with a billiard ball: "You trow ball against me, I trow ball against you." His clown's face grows mournful, however, as he reports how the man died at the "firsta stroke," and, he emphasizes, "I ham no criminelle."

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Distinguishing intention from result, he opens a corridor into his own being. Finally, Roberto chooses a gloriously inappropriate expression of singularity, "I ham a good egg!" and changes it into a collective one: "We har a good egg!" At this, the men become a trinity. Roberto has employed language in such a way as to break down the boundary between self and other.

"Okay, Leonardo da Vinci," a prison guard kids Roberto. Like Leonardo, our little convict—his hair standing up in bunches from the electricity generated by that active brain—is a man of ideas both practical and transcendent. He is therefore in touch with the most basic kinds of reality. He knows that in order to survive man needs fire, for example, and he is associated with fire throughout the film. The men find some matches in a deserted cabin on the bayou; only the matches and a salt shaker distinguish the interior of the cabin from a jail cell. They also find a leaky canoe at its dock. When the canoe sinks, Roberto preserves the matches and thus preserves the men. He catches, kills, and cooks a rabbit; in this he draws on ingenuity and communal memory. The others have not the slightest inkling as to what they should do—and fall upon each other for the second time.

As he roasts this rabbit, Roberto articulates his regret that he does not have "garlique, rosemarino, olive oila," what he calls the "secrets" of his mother's cooking. The artist and the shaman know that the most common ingredients can have magical properties. This is the same fellow who has drawn a window on his cell wall. He wants to be precise, and asks Jack if one says in English "I look *out* the window or I look *at* the window." Jack, American technician, grins good-naturedly, "In this case, Bob, you'd have to say I'm looking *at* the window." Roberto has something in common with the other inmates who have tried to conjure up their girlfriends by drawing their (for them) essential features—lips, breasts, pudenda; Roberto, too, believes in the power of the image. Jarmusch, like Roberto, is enchanted by American colloquial speech, its concrete richness, its allusions to nature, its animation, its many ingestive figures. Roberto, we note, has a hard time, however, with its mildly hostile expressions such as "Buzz off!" and "Scram!" The filmmaker has a wonderful time, too,

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with the quirkiness of English: there are many jokes based on the Italians' pronunciation of "ed" in the past tense, on misplaced prepositions, or on the foreigners solemnly pronouncing the silent "e," for example, in "Uncle Luigi's clothe*s*." Language, Jarmusch acknowledges, is an imprecise vehicle. Yet figurative language in particular exerts a powerful charm. It is Roberto's (unintentionally) comic use of "I ham a good egg" that persuades the guard to let him take a walk, and thus escape, with the other two. Even "I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream" becomes a chant whereby our three friends rouse the entire prison.

Roberto, perhaps like the Hungarian-born Jarmusch, is enthralled—no, liberated—by American poetry, spontaneous or formal, which, the film suggests, may be our only freedom within circumstantial confines. Roberto apologizes because he has read our poets only in Italian. The irony resides in our realization that many (most?) Americans, suffering from the linguistic and emotional inhibitions Jarmusch chronicles, have not read them at all. Jack certainly has not; Zack, since he recognizes the impropriety of calling Frost "Bob," and laughs with pleased surprise at Roberto's recitations, may have read them somewhere along the line. Perhaps the powerful, whoever they may be, do not need poetry—or each other. But in New Orleans, city of the sainted downtrodden, it is perfectly likely that a petty hood could say "Man, I am serious as cancer," and a pimp have enough literary awareness to allude, as Jack does, to Mark Twain coming along in his steamboat. In this film, the metamorphic use of language is tied to the notion of rapport, camaraderie, the bond of love, which are essential to the survival of those who are down. Whether this need of one's fellow precedes the verbal effort, or vice versa, it is only after Jack and Zack have rescued Roberto that their language breaks out of the realm of the self-referential. Only then Zack can speak of "Red ants—they'll eat up an entire family in half an hour" or enumerate the many snakes in the bayous, calling each by name. He can then describe an alligator as being "twelve or fifteen feet—about three of you, Bob." At Roberto's love feast, the poet in Zack is freed: "This rabbit tastes like a tire," he comments. When the two aborigines wander off, each on his own, afraid, suspicious of the other—

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there are even some jokes about cannibalism—they lapse into solipsism—or "Bullshit"—once again.

Jarmusch insists that Leonardo da Vinci, too, is incomplete without the others. When the men are being tracked, the Americans know they will have to cross the river to put the hounds off their scent. Roberto, however, cannot swim. At first, eager to save their own necks, Jack and Zack leave Roberto screaming "My friends!" on the river bank. But they do come back for him. Their primary motive in this may be to keep him from betraying them; we never find out. They certainly seem more fond of him, and he, of course, of them, after they have rescued him than before. Nor is Roberto the perfect altruist. When the three reach dry land and discover Luigi's Tintop, they delegate Bob their Daniel, Jack and Zack fearing the presence of the law inside the little bistro. With his usual aplomb, or naivete, Roberto simply walks in. Several hours later, Jack and Zack, cold, wet, and hungry in the bushes, wonder what has happened to their chum, and approach the window. This lion's den is actually a bower: Roberto is being served dinner by a bewitchingly beautiful woman, with whom he is—naturally—engaged in an animated conversation. The bedraggled Americans enter. "My friends!" cries Roberto; in his surprise and delight he has forgotten all about them.

Yet Jack and Zack do not begrudge Roberto his newfound happiness. In this most charming episode, a benign and zany Providence is revealed as matchmaking more perfectly than any mere mortal could. Nicoletta (Nicoletta Braschi), a *paisana* of Roberto, also has a taste for adventure, and under the press of adversity has arrived in the enchanted forest. Roberto tells his friends that she has asked him to remain with her forever and ever, as "in a storybook for children." The two frizzy-haired lovers are of a kind, soul and body; Nicoletta makes Roberto espresso in the morning while the others drink coffee. As the Italians dance with childlike abandon to a gloriously silly song about the endless rain, Jack and Zack look on with good-natured approval—and something like incomprehension.

For we cannot imagine Zack or Jack dancing in such a fashion. We cannot imagine them happily in love. As Roberto en-

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ters his domestic phase, he calls out to his departing friends, "Don't forgetta to write!" but, again, we can no more conceive of their writing than of their marrying. They are loners—and losers. Theirs is a sad and beautiful world because, though intensely feeling, they will always retreat, we fear, to the confinement of the self. Roberto at one point recites a stanza of "The Road Not Taken" in Italian. He does not realize the implications of that poem with its mystique of the solitary traveller, separate, unlike, apart. At the end, Jack and Zack set out, each intent on going his own way, towards a crossing where two identical roads diverge. As if this parting were not sad enough, when Jack puts out his hand to Zack in the American male gesture of affection and respect, Zack yanks his back in a hitchhiker's signal.

The flight from woman which Leslie Fiedler has explored in the American novel is seen here as extending itself, lengthening into a journey away from the other, and one's feelings. This escape, of course, is its own terrible prison. The American males in this film are in the end as lonely and silent and beautiful as the trees in the bayou, as the trees on their island at the crossroads. Unlike the trees, however, Jack and Zack are rootless. They aspire to self-containment, but manage only to set themselves adrift. Roberto, like Nicoletta who cooks ziti in the middle of the forest primeval, is not trying to escape the human condition, and thus is at home anywhere. Jack and Zack, we suspect, are at home nowhere. There is no sign, east or west, at the crossroads, and it does not matter—for our friends in their detachment are truly lost.

That no man is an island—or a tree—is a fact the American dream ignores. Going it alone, our two friends are indeed outlaws, down by the law of kind. Jarmusch proposes this mythic truth about ourselves humorously, elegiacally; in this cinematic poem, he never condescends to his characters, his subject, or the city and country he depicts, as the theme song goes, with its "jockey full of bourbon" when it "can't stand up." For in this sad and beautiful film, every frame presents all things and people—pimps, whores, trees, decaying porches, rotting boats, abandoned cabins—striving to realize their moment against the drip-drop of eternity.

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A. R. AMMONS

Inclinations

In the time that
was before
us we were to be but in
the time
to follow where will
our zero touch down:
the infinity
of the incoming, then,
ending in finitude,
our days and ways,
was not
infinite, but into the
emptiness arising
infinity can get lost,
infinity itself,
so that infinity feels
different, a losing not
a finding place:
becoming out
of an infinitely arising
is not the same as
going away
with an infinite going away:

that is of course if
time so far away doesn't
build itself into
a curve and swing around
(how large a nothingness
we float the small
feather of possibility on)
but why if it swings
around should it swing

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around into us and if it
does will it swing
around into all of us,
will we all be here
as before,
brother to brother, mother
to child,
father, son:

I daresay that would be
quite a coincidence
and yet a hope so general
coincidence takes on
the simplism and
certainty of a sign:

swinging around, in that
it builds coming back into
going away, is tantamount to
questioning infinity,
going out going out no
farther than it goes out:
but there are infinitely
turning infinities,
circles, figure-8's,
mobiuses:

if we came back, though, &
found the details all the
same, would we be pleased,
would we just live our life
again and never know we had
known everyone and done
everything before
or would we
have the sneaking suspicion
that this reminded us of
something
nearly forgotten:
what would be the use of

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doing it
exactly the same again:
and why do it
if it is to be different
but, as for agony, the same:

if soul or soulspace is
neither created nor
destroyed (and surely somewhere
is a where
creation and destruction
hardly, if at all, alter)
then we have a
different ball game:
we'll go on:
but not particularly as
ourselves: the essential
will go on, the essential
us, perhaps, but, perhaps,
so essential
that when it picks up more
trappings
the design of the clothes
will be unlike, even offend,
us:

perhaps life does not relate
to its two big bluffy
timeless zones: maybe, life is
just for its seconds: one
second you're here on your
surfboard or deathbed, or
flying through
space toward the gorge-rock,
and the next second you're
not here
and there is absolutely no
durance before nor after you
are here:
that seems much more manageable:

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it cuts away so much and
sharpens relevancies:
no use to dwell around befoggy
about your possible birth
or to linger on afterwards
making definite
arrangements for a comeback:

perhaps, though, there are
really no instants, maybe
they are illusory or they are
nearsighted misreadings:
maybe they are the edgy
subwork of a mere integral
calculus we can't quite swoop
with:
supposing there is somewhere
in the local universe
something like a hurdle or
crest, like a marker for the
high jump, and, say, everything
time and all stuff, breaks out
over that crest
and we seem to be here merely
as we turn through this
active, unmarked scope:
    possible, of course, the
    crest itself could be
wavelike in motion, progressive
about various phases of the
universe and offering its
uplift to whatever is around
and ready:

is one, in other words,
swept through by larger
continuities in
the brevities of one's hours:

we are probably not in a

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rapids: if the universe is
the flux, what would
be the rocks:
but motionwise our immediate
universe could be like a
drop of water flicked up by
the bursting rapids
to fall back into tumultuous
ongoing:
the rise and fall could
nevertheless show the design
of a singular (and departing)
action, an excepting
distinction seeks, an
individuation exclusion prompts:

motions like meanings are
subsumed and further subsumed:
the arc of our frailty
dismantles but
other motions boil and swirl
us into other meanings:

why are we so worried, as if
we were in charge:
are we to rely on the
possibilities we can imagine:

we think we know everything
because we think we know
everything we know:
but there may be spacious
layouts we have no housings to
put in yet:

you can put classicism inside
romanticism but you can't
put romanticism inside classicism:

we circle the holy, stand liths

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(phallic cymbals) intervalled
appropriately about shined
through with kinds of seasonal
mathematics with protectorate
grooves and ledges further
outstanding, each marcato
inwardly announcing intensification
till the holy roar at
the priestly center enchants
solicits the skies, brings
down the rain or
stirs the wind, beseechings
pain trues like the lean
a tree makes of the total
winds: we get it right: we
screw and dream, we husband
and rear, we win and hold,
we beg forgiveness, we enact
accuracy as supplication, we
school precision till the polestar
sits in our beam, we rise
too risen at times, we misjudge
the low: all we want is what
we want, touch, strength,
we want lith and plinth,
penetralia, release:
(the same place disturbs and eases)

we beg forgiveness because what
is there to beg for when you
have everything except
forgiveness for having it

the universe, empty as
it is, might from far enough
away look as solid as a man:
our incarnation is blurry:
the fingertips end, plus or
minus, in a fog, flakes and
shedding shale, millions of

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organisms scrambling for
space or hiding, furrows
like glacial lake-lines:
more vaguely yet, we're breath
and broken wind, feces,
moisture from mouths, eyes,
ears, skin, scalings of teeth,
epithelial sheddings, eargum,
eye cracklings, snot,
germ-lively perspiration, all
our byproducts, the incomings
and outgoings wither and
spall our containing walls,

my father said
folks used to
bean up overnight

and gather the next
morning at the
farting pole:

each contestant
grabbed
hold of the pole,

cocked a leg, left or
right, and split
a tune, criteria

running from pitch
to volume to length
of announcement,

slidings from
keen whines to
baritone bellows

how long the world's been here
while the myths like river

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systems or ocean currents or
weather lows and highs migrate
turning into and out of
figurations having turning in common:
  if, though (though, though,
though) your current instants
contain each a cry, each cry
boxed, enflamed and wound out
with screeching ribbons, knots gripping
centers or sheets checkered
with disjunction, abrupt,
pointed, opposite changes—
why, then, oblivion may become
paradise, expectation may not
involve streets and clothes,
wagons and weddings, jobs and
accruements but expectation
may wear the look searching
nothingness, a paradise golden
by rusty earth, the only
way to lift the tumor out to
let it no longer weigh:

this time of year I stop every
day by the forsythia, its gold
daily different from
green to bronze to white gold
and I stand still and say to
myself, now, check this out:
but the still pictures I take
erode from
the mind and wash away
whereas the things I move
around without paying any
attention to build up distally
into present-fresh permanences:
odd how one thing holds to
another's motion:

so they put all your boxes of

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instants into the box and
lower you away to a
resting ground—this you will
not feel, no stuffy nose, no
crinklings, parts through the
hair, no lip drifts, or eye
cross rolls: gravity will
pull, bottoms will collect
fluids while the tops become paper
thin and musty crisp: but
you will not need to object,
everything will use mannerly
in the scheme of natural things:
still, you'll be a
long time getting free of
that much, that secure a
bondage, trying to keep the
old once again preventing you
from the liberal mixes and
flows of being altogether free
of the physical holding at
last:
    why not consider cremation
and whiff away suddenly:
except for the grieving ones
confronting the spiritual blank
with no place to turn for you:
let them have a stone (a
phallic cymbal) noded with a
granite-ring peak: let them
have a mound, the mournful
displacement of the underground:
give them weeds to pick and a
place to set the flowers
(someone may steal to another
grave, no matter, try
artificials): was the person
never a body, then, what we
loved was an inhabitant not
really confined in soil or

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lost in smoke but the unimaginable
quantity now returned a
resource to its sources or
those distal frames a few so
clear buried in our brains,
living in our body again, this
time ours: what was alive in
other flesh lives on in us,
the son carries the father,
the other loss filling the son's
mind as grief: we are all
one person: if the universe
could be seen far off it might
be a man getting his tapes
out to play his girl: the eye
breaks down before our
insolidities: we roll universes
within us when we rock:

I do admire discursion's air,
the facts stripped flat,
informational, no more alignment
practised between them than
practice requires, no honeyed
energy surfeit anywhere, no
glow in excess of limitations,
leftover mizzlement: and
no theory working through,
embranching and leafing till
every cell works to the good
of a trunk, till every bit of
sky is brought into subservience,
the fully yielded image, at
once its general and specific,
the flame-work locked in,
the prison of consistency,
the tyranny of insistence:
oh, no, I do admire the
slightness of reason that
tunnels through a turbulence

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with only so much way as to
make its way: surprise, then,
enriching possibility,
swerve and swell befall, the
worm's interest in the tree,
boring:

explaining's inexhaustible
(nothing having yet been
explained) but explaining in
every time wears a different
cast which is explaining
enough, the tone, the air,
the slant, the character:
then, too: the definitional
can keep you going while a
focus brought on by totality
of apprehension leaves you
struck, nodding off: but
inexhaustibility inexhaustibly
enough comes on with concrete
ridges, streaks of peaks,
real ravines edgy with brush
and sharp here and there where
washes or falls scour wear
away:
    discursion allows
speaking at large as small
speaking: dwell here or there on a
twig-end, what's lost, tommorrow's
twig can be different, a variety
spaced on the other side of the scope:
whereas
large speaking that just
rises up into mist over the midst
has no underbottom precision works:
where,
for example, can the
sidewinder sidewind or the rattler
rattle, or the stream stream

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if not in the actual
and yet, to tell the truth,
I'm not sure it isn't the
propositional that survives:
Emerson makes spare rhymed (ribbed?)
or unrhymed metrical contrivances
that say something interesting,
whereas
some people's *quartz contentment*
or masted Manahatta, forget
such dark impasses:

(art turns on itself and ends
inexhaustibly in
turning endlessness)

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KATHLEEN HILL

Flood

On summer nights when my sister, Maddie, and I pursued fireflies, a jar in one hand and a perforated lid in the other, we sometimes stumbled through the bayberry hedge behind our house, scratching our bare legs on the thorns. On the other side of the hedge we headed for the *rhododendron bushes surrounding our neighbors' screened* porch. There the fireflies were thickest. Maddie and I thought that talking, even whispering, worked against us, so our barefooted approach was silent. Once we must have made some noise in our plunge into the rhododendrons, snapped a twig or rustled a branch, because as we sat there beneath the waxy leaves we heard the screened door open. We looked up to see Josephine Beecher standing on the step, the light from the porch falling across her back. "Yes?" she called so softly we wondered if she thought anyone could hear her. We sat perfectly still, not because we were afraid of being caught, but because it didn't seem to us that she was asking if we were there. Maddie scratched a mosquito bite on her leg and looked across at me. She had put her jar on the ground between her bare feet, and the fireflies, blinking on and off, were crawling up the glassy sides. I raised a finger to my mouth and Maddie made a face at me; I didn't need to tell her to be quiet. Again Josephine called, this time even more quietly than the first. We could smell the smoke from her cigarette although we couldn't see it through the pattern of leaves. After sitting perfectly still for what seemed a long time, listening to the cicadas, we heard Mrs. Beecher's voice, calling from inside: "If you don't close that door, Josephine, the house will be full of mosquitoes." Josephine turned, then, pulling the door behind her and we went back to our fireflies.

On another occasion, a Halloween, we were invited into the house we seldom entered. We had pushed through the hedge

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in our costumes and gone around to knock on the front door of the Beechers' house. Josephine had opened it, drawling her mock astonishment. Standing a little behind her, Mrs. Beecher benignly regarded us before extending a plate of cookies frosted orange to look like pumpkins. We each took one and let it drop into our paper bag where it fell apart in crumbs down among the pennies and apples and Hershey bars. As we turned to go, adjusting our masks, Mrs. Beecher asked if we would mind coming into the kitchen; she had something she wanted to send home to our mother. In the kitchen, Mrs. Beecher opened a drawer and took out a knife with a flexible blade that curved forward at the end like a bent finger. She told us it was a knife for fixing grapefruit, that our grandmother had lent it to her years before, when Josephine and our mother were little girls, and she wanted to send it back to our house where it belonged. "Couldn't you have found some other time, Mother?" Josephine asked, leaning against the sink. "They don't want to be bothered with that now." Uncomfortable, we looked out the window at the unfamiliar face of our house. Most of the leaves were off the tulip and oak trees that stood at either end of the hedge so it wasn't hard to see the chimney with its clay pots, the steep incline of the roof, the windows, some lighted, some dark, from which we ordinarily looked out at the Beechers' house.

On our way from the kitchen to the front door, we were led by Josephine through the dining room where their half-eaten dinners waited for them. Maddie and I were eager to get out, but Josephine stopped to ask if we'd seen the walls Mrs. Beecher had painted with scenes from Prairie du Chien, the town where she had grown up. While Mrs. Beecher stood with her hands folded in front of her, smiling at us, Josephine pointed to a wall where we could make out a picture of a river with some willow trees hanging over it. That was the Mississippi River, Josephine told us, bordering Prairie du Chien on one side. And on the other side, she said, turning to point to the adjacent wall, was the prairie. We turned and saw painted there long grass bending in the wind with a bird flying over it. "Mother spent years on these," Josephine said, drawling. She raised her cigarette stiffly to her mouth, drew on it deeply, then lowered her hand, twisted with arthritis,

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against the leg of her pants. Her eyes rested languidly on the bird. "Years," she said again. We wondered if she meant that we should admire the paintings or ask ourselves how they could have taken so long. Josephine's gray hair that still had traces of red in it was fastened back from her face with brown combs that were falling loose. Mrs. Beecher reached toward Josephine's brooding head to secure one of them. "Will you *not*?" Josephine said and jerked her head away. Mrs. Beecher turned toward us, disregarding Josephine's glare. "With her poor hands, you know, it's difficult for her to do things."

After we had grown up and moved away, we saw Josephine and Mrs. Beecher very rarely but heard about them from time to time. During a September hurricane a branch from the oak tree crashed through the roof of their house, waking them up in the middle of the night. Josephine went to the third floor to look and was startled by the sight of a room filled with shiny wet leaves stretched against a length of black bark. A few years later Mrs. Beecher embroidered a tablecloth with purple iris around the edges and walked through the hedge to give it to our mother. As she worked on the tablecloth, Mrs. Beecher said, she sat by a window looking out at our house and it seemed to her it belonged there. Then when Josephine was sixty-three she took early retirement because of the arthritis in her hands. This was only two years before she would have had to retire in any case, but her retirement was spoken of as an astonishing event, perhaps because no one had ever thought that Mrs. Beecher, by this time ninety, would still be at home waiting for her. For the next five years there was no news from Josephine but Mrs. Beecher called our mother now and then to report that one of them had a cold, that there would be a lunar eclipse that night, that Josephine's hands were so bad she could no longer manage her buttons.

"Neighbors for seventy years," our mother said when she called me one winter morning to say that Josephine was dead. "That's rare."

At seven o'clock our mother had been awakened by a call from the police who in turn had just been telephoned by Mrs. Beecher. She had mentioned our mother's name, asking that

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she accompany them when they came to the house. Our mother threw on her coat and walked through the hedge. Mrs. Beecher, her eyes hooded at the corners, met her at the door. The ambulance had come and gone and now Mrs. Beecher thought she would rest. When the police arrived a few minutes later, she was already in bed. Our mother told them what Mrs. Beecher had told her. They walked through the house, turning off lights, looking at the collapsed ceiling in the dining room. Together they stared at the brown combs in the bathtub, their cusps arched away from the drain, at the three-legged stool standing in several inches of water where Mrs. Beecher sat all night, holding Josephine's head.

This night of cold so fierce the rhododendron leaves were curled into cones, I imagine like this: the house with the three lights burning, one on the table next to Josephine's bed where the *Reader's Digest* lay open face down, another light in Mrs. Beecher's room on the table next to the sewing basket, and the last in the bathroom. Outside the moon made shadows on the snow, forked streaks of blue cast by the trees, an oblong extending from the house. Everywhere, quiet. Crossing the sky, the moon rearranged the shadows but made no noise. Inside, at first, there was the sound of water running in the bathtub. Later on, the house was still. It wouldn't have been possible to have heard the water seeping through the dining room ceiling onto the muraled walls, running in streaks through the prairie grass, the bird's extended wings. The wall blistered and broke, clumps of plaster fell to the ground damply, without making any noise. Silently the water overflowing the bathtub engulfed the perpetual summer day that had surrounded Mrs. Beecher and Josephine every night while they ate their dinner.

It seemed to Mrs. Beecher, who was dozing on her bed, the water had been running long enough. She called Josephine's name before she went to look. When there was no answer she lowered her legs over the edge of the bed and felt with her bare feet for her slippers. When she didn't immediately find them she thought they must be under the bed but didn't bend down to look. Stooping took time and she wanted to see about Josephine. Crossing the floor, her feet were cold. When she reached the hall she could see the bathroom door

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was closed but without her glasses she wasn't able to make out the stream of water slowly flowing from under the door, across the hall and down the stairs. She felt for the knob and became aware, as her hand closed over it, that her feet were wet. It was only after she'd turned it, however, and pushed open the door that she suddenly felt the splash rising around her. At the same moment she saw Josephine floating face down in the bathtub, her hair lightly rising and falling with the steady flow of water over the edge of the tub. The orange robe that covered her was dry just across her back where the water hadn't touched it; her feet, toes pointing toward each other, extended stiffly in the direction of the door.

The first thing Mrs. Beecher did was to turn off the water. She leaned across Josephine's body and twisted shut each faucet, the cold, then the hot. Despite the fact that she was trembling, her fingers obediently tightened, then relaxed their grip. Straightening, she thought that this was what Josephine had not been able to do; struggling with the knobs, she must have lost her balance and pitched forward. The thought of Josephine frightened, clutching at the edge of the tub, made her want to sit down. It wasn't until she'd drawn the stool close and had lowered herself onto it that she looked down and saw that her feet were resting in a pool of water that came up to her ankles.

Because Josephine was floating so close to the rim, it was easier than Mrs. Beecher had thought to tip her out. The water spilled over the side in a rush, drenching Mrs. Beecher's lap and hitting the tiled wall behind her. Josephine's body fell onto the floor topside up, the orange robe sticking against one side of her body. Her hair, completely white now, stretched in wet bands along her face and down her neck. Mrs. Beecher looked at her face upside down and the eyes, wide open beneath brows drawn a little together, looked like little smiling moons. The edges of the nostrils were white, her mouth round and surprised. Nowhere in her face could Mrs. Beecher see the signs of terror or exhaustion she had dreaded.

As she struggled to raise Josephine's head from the floor and bring it to her lap, she remembered how she had lifted Josephine, just turned one, from another bathtub. To be free to work on a sketch, she had put a few inches of water in the

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tub so that Josephine could play there and be out of the way. At first everything had gone well. She knew the repeated splash meant Josephine was slapping water with her hand, and she gave herself happily to her work. Wonderful, she thought, the baby, lines taking shape on paper. Then the splashing had stopped and Josephine had begun to coo, softly at first, then more insistently, and finally with the desperation of a long wail. At first she had tried to ignore the change, to concentrate more firmly on the shape that was emerging, but Josephine was crying in earnest now. She called out that it was all right, she would be there in a minute. In a minute, she thought, her sketch would be finished and she would gladly go. The crying subsided gradually to sad breathless gasps, then to an occasional long shudder, and finally to silence. The quiet worried her as the crying hadn't and she had put her paper down and gone to look. Josephine's head with its red curls were resting on the edge of the tub, her chin upright against the rim, her eyes closed. That she herself should have been the agent of Josephine's defeated collapse into sleep, her surrender at the limits of exhaustion, gave her a feeling of desolation she'd never known and she snatched Josephine up, waking her, kissing her face, her little shoulders, her neck.

By extending her legs straight out in front of her in the pool of water, Mrs. Beecher managed to use them as a support in sliding Josephine's body forward and raising her shoulders off the floor. When Josephine's head was at last resting against her knees, she was glad to turn away and look at the ceiling, into the dip of the basin and, by turning her neck, out the window. The mirror over the basin was still clouded with steam but the windowpane had begun to trickle. In one corner of the window she could see a brightness that she recognized as the moon. As she watched, it gradually floated clear of the window frame, emerging isolate and whole. As a child she had liked to think that her moon was the same one the Indians, not so long before, had looked up at as they were running across the prairie. Now it seemed to her just as remarkable that the moon crossing the sky as she sat there with Josephine's head on her lap was the same moon she had loved to watch, ninety years ago, reflected in

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the river. It shone now on the shrivelled oak leaves whose hold would be broken only by the push of new leaves in spring, on the upright remainder of the blossoms on the tulip tree. Then she had been entranced by the gleam it made on spring nights across the dull surface of softened ice, in the black depths of the newly released flow.

Water at floodtime, she thought, and turned her head back to Josephine. Her hair was drying in ringlets as it had always done until she was about thirty and started fastening it with combs. One cluster fell forward and Mrs. Beecher extended a hand to push it back. Reassured by the familiar curve of bone resting in her hand, Mrs. Beecher stroked Josephine's forehead over and over, smoothing her hair. "Never mind," she whispered and shifted her legs so that Josephine's body could rest more securely against the inside of her thighs. Drifting a little, her eyes half closed, she thought of rising water, of the sudden burst that had preceded Josephine's birth. Then her husband had been with her, stroking her forehead just as she was now stroking Josephine's. There had been the terrible bearing down, the push, and then the baby sprawled against her leg, flesh against flesh, its limbs even then flailing in the uncertain spaces where it would labor always backward toward rest.

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MARK JARMAN

The Home

They went there one Sunday afternoon
With the manager of The Home
Who wanted to show them how poor
Though decent the former facilities were,
And to take them to the construction site.
Some you will meet, he warned them,
Do not wish to move. And this
They understood, the three of them,
The committee representing The Committee.
And some do not know what is happening,
He confided, and some in fact
It will be difficult to move.
The broad pink stucco building
Bleached in the sunshine, and he nodded
Toward the upper story when he said "difficult."
The infirmary was there, under the roof.
Before the building on the wide lawn
That spread like a shelf then sloped
Down to the loud highway,
A few residents in steel lawn chairs
Basked in the sunlight, distantly,
Small figures in ones, twos, threes.
The manager opened the entry door
And rattled it, which shook
Its squares of glass, and the committee
Shook their heads, too.
A small woman, neatly attired,
Met them and looked up in each face.
Her rosy scalp and sparse white hair
Looked fresh, and she shook everyone's hand.
Notice the linoleum floors,

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Said the manager, they are laid on concrete.
And the nearly bald woman nodded.
She too would be glad to leave.
It's a Ford facility, she said,
But we try to give Cadillac care.
The committee murmured and smiled.
They looked along the arched ceiling
Where the fire sprinklers ran
And, heads tilted back, seemed to follow them
Behind the manager down the dim hall.
Doors were closed where residents
Were napping or, they could hear,
Watching their private TV's.
A band of harsh sunlight crossed ahead.
The solarium, said the manager.
There were book shelves, one with glass doors.
A tall, angular man who said nothing
Passed them and lowered the blinds
On one window and sat with a book
In the brown dusk of a corner.
John, the manager said to him,
It's such a fine day outside.
John looked up from his book, put
A cigar in his mouth. Now, John,
The manager said, and touched the small woman's elbow.
She sat beside John and nodded goodbye.
The manager led the committee
Around the corner. The lower floor,
He said, is a U. This is the east wing,
And here, since he is out at the moment,
You can take a look at John's room.
It was a big room and looked out at a hedge
That grew too close for the window to open completely.
And look, the manager said, how stiff
These handles are, and cranked one.
Notice the heat register, too,
Steam heat, terribly dry.
Through chinks of the hedge they saw color.
Yes, that's the garden he said.
And heard three flat, unrelated whistle notes.

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Our gardener, the manager smiled.
Listen to this, he turned on the tap
At the sink, and the pipes banged and screeched.
But you know, John wants to stay.
There wasn't much to the room.
His bed near the window, a desk,
And the massive TV draped with lace
And covered on top with photographs.
The manager shut John's door softly.
Let's see the infirmary, he said.
Outside between wings they saw
A croquet game staked out
And, bent to it, a group of four.
Three women and a man who held
A wire arch like a witching wand.
Where, ladies? he was saying.
Then they came to the outside ramp.
A new addition, just wide enough
For a gurney, the manager said.
They filed up and could touch
The blistered paint on the wall.
We won't need to sandblast now, said the manager.
Inside, it was sunnier than below.
All the doors were open and most
Lying in beds had curtains open.
The committee, glancing in, saw
The sick smiling back or asleep.
The nurse, a crisp New Zealander,
Opened the windows, she said, twice a day,
Sun or snow, rain or wind.
The committee nodded, but each
Worried too late to ask.
The manager said, Mother is here.
In one room where curtains were drawn
Lay a figure with a sheet laid on lightly,
Salmon-rouged cheeks,
Bluish curls cropped close.
Mother, the manager whispered, won't you be glad
To leave here? She snored a little.
Mother's asleep, he said. But she will be glad.

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They left the nest of invalids,
Hearing, below, a glissando of bells.
The dinner call, the manager explained.
In the hall of the east wing
There was John with a glockenspiel
Hammering and slurring the steel keys,
An unlit cigar—the same?—
Plugged in the side of his mouth.
Doors opened, and women in print dresses,
Stooped as if to peer around corners,
Walked out, keeping that posture.
There were a few couples, too,
Men smaller than their women.
Though the single men, like John,
Seemed stronger, dapper, knotting ties
And setting their faces toward dinner.
The manager guided the committee
Among the slow moving line,
Here and there falling in step
With an old woman or man.
Aren't these floors cold and hard, Mary?
And to the croquet players,
We'll have a big game room at the new place.
The faces aimed ahead, bemused,
As if voices pestered them
After they'd switched off their hearing aids.
The manager led the committee to the kitchen.
I want you to see this, he said.
A yellow cavern, though clean
(All was clean everywhere
Except where edges crumbled
And no sponging could check the decay).
Two huge female cooks and two
Whip-thin serving women worked up
A batch of chipped beef for dinner.
All this will change, of course.
Seated among the twenty or so tables,
The manager pointed to pictures on walls,
Mostly oblongs of oily twilight,
Sepias, faded earth tones.

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These will go, too, the manager said.
We want friendly, vivid colors.

And when one of the committee,
A woman the manager's age or older,
Asked why all were so silent, "sullen" she said,
The manager stopped chewing and listened.
China and silver clicked and clacked
Mocking the clip clop of false teeth.
And he sighed, but first joked
That everyone must be hungry.
They are looking at us, she said, "glaring."
And the other committee members,
One older, one younger man, nodded.
They are waiting to learn who you are, of course.
So the manager rose, his napkin sliding
Off his lap to the floor, and spoke.
Good evening, everyone. He was answered
By a grumble of mouths not yet empty of food.
I am showing our guests the new site after supper
Where already our new home is underway.
Better hurry, someone said.
Bye bye, said another.
The manager did not sit down but smiled,
Shall we go? And the committee, tongues probing teeth,
Napkin ends dabbed at mouths,
Rose and followed him out.

They drove along silently,
Each thinking, and the manager feeling
His heart cramped and pressed for time
Since it was growing dark and he needed
Light to show off the building.

Nothing these three might do could stop it.
The foundations were laid, the skeleton up,
The wiring being installed and all
Would be better than what they had seen.
Surely they knew this. He drove.
He would almost have spoken his mind

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As the street lights began to glow softly.
Instead he sped up, rounding the hill
Where the new home looked out at the city
And the vast green of a cemetery,
Which he was persuaded resembled a golf course
And offered the peace of a golf course.
They found as they rounded the bend
They were the first on the scene
Of the fire that lit up the building site
Like a cage of glow worms. Just beginning,
It burst into glory as the car stopped.

Ah, it was the sunset, turning
The bare studs and struts to charcoal.
If they would follow him, said the manager,
He would show them the evening vista
Over the rolling lawns below,
The flat slabs of polished granite
Like windows of coral light. Do you see?
He asked the committee. Look at it.
They looked. They saw everything.

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Talking to Strangers

Mainly you keep your mouth shut,
mainly you listen to your mother's
ghost and never talk to them, but
there are those nights when your whole

life story rolls out with reckless ease.
You never know when it may happen,
it comes like a fever when you travel.
In trains or planes, in the bars

of strange hotels, you give yourself
away and tell all the secrets you
never tell your friends. And the strangers
obey the fairness rule and tell you

secrets too. You nod and grin
at stories of their wives and bosses.
They nod and grin for you.
This is all part of the game—

if you talk you must listen
just as you must admire
wallet photos and business cards.
Blabbermouths become good listeners

on nights like this. Nothing is close
to the vest and your whole flimsy
life becomes fabulous and rich.
Here the art is all touch-up and airbrush,

all shading and good light, subtle
forgery, burnished cameo.
On such nights you want your story

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to ride like contraband in the back

of someone's mind, foggy from
the night before. You want it to
glide over streets you'll never see
and worm its way into someone

else's dreams. And you know that
whatever you confess, no matter
how tall your tale gets, no matter
how much you embroider and lie,

it will never be held against you.

JEFFREY HARRISON

In the Attic

The thick air smelled of dust and wood.
Shiny, blue-black wasps, dangling their legs,
bounced off the facets of the roof
with quick, electrical buzzes.
I used to stay up there for hours, sitting
on the rough floor, jagged with splinters,

paging through stacks of Life magazine.
Or I'd stare through the Gothic window,
past spider webs, dead wasps,
and the ragged nests the starlings
had stuffed into the bargeboard, to feel
what it's like to be in the treetops.

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This time I was up there for a reason.
Years ago, in the top drawer of a dresser
my mother had painted Pennsylvania Dutch,
I'd found a bundle of envelopes
stained amber by the attic's heat
like the mattresses piled on the old brass bed.

I'd been afraid to read them. Now,
I untied the dull blue ribbon.
It stayed crimped and folded from the bow.
The yellow pages crackled as I opened them.
They were written by my father, full of
ambition, jealousy, infatuation.

It was a side of him I'd never seen.
I had written letters like these
when I was fourteen, letters I'd burn
to see now. I read each one, one for every
day that summer. There was one from my mother:
blue ink on white paper, no envelope.

She described a view I knew by heart:
the lake framed by hemlocks, the mountain
reflected in the evening, its rock face
staring blankly. She said it made her think
of God. She said, yes, she would be his wife
if he was sure he understood what that meant.

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MARTHA RONK LIFSON

The Seitz Theater

Back of the silver screen in Sandusky
my Uncle Clinton and his wife Florence
stayed the night in a small wooden room lent
by the family before his annual sermon
at Grace Church downtown. So I'd think of him
living behind, "nay beyond," the technicolor
romances I saw there. After moving into
dark velvet spaces for an entire afternoon
my sisters and I would see what we never
got to see at home: huge lipsticked faces
kissing and the hairy necks of pirates,
their bloused shirts my first taste
of the seductive fabric of the world.
I pulled my socks up to cover my legs
and pulled my skirt down. After,
we'd wait for the dim lights and make our way
to the narrow stairs left of the screen
where Clinton would sit with Bible in hand
his black clothes smelling of smoke.
Three pipes lined up seemed
to give order to the ashy room, the abruptness
of mortality I felt. On screen
no one was ever this old. We fingered things
and nodded until my mother came to fetch us
for another technicolor, sunset ride
to Put-in-Bay. It was larger than life
this summertime in Ohio
and even this little man, nineteen years
older than my mother had his own bright moment
on stage. Still I hear him next day saying
God's grace would come pouring out like water
from a great pitcher in the sky. It must be
Lake Erie water I thought each summer
after the same sermon, as I plunged
in my first bikinis into redemption and sin.

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JAMES BAKER HALL

The Dogs

Of the two weeks we will be gone, the first days
will be sunny, their spirits will go from bright room to room
and across the orange carpet, and into the closets,
into the backs of closets—
They follow the toad

that spins around the house
when we leave, each day slower,
our hair and other house lint

his dark cocoon. Each night
they will pass from room to room, mere echoes
of their nails on the hard floors, as though even the walls
had forgotten them, and each morning

they will come back to lie down
head to paw
before his exhaustion

and to grieve—creatures
gathering our absences
around them
in shrouds.
In their dreams
they find themselves dogs again

the missing truck tops
the hill, known
by its lights,

and they are in the drive
barking at each other
as they always did.

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JOYCE CAROL OATES

Playground

At this time of day it's deserted
but always when you drive by your senses
quicken. Why, you can't know, when
the children's swings are empty and stilled,
merely metal. A derelict playground
at the edge of town. Weeds and litter like
shreds of dreams. A tall slide, tarnished
monkey bars like snarls of headache—old
reliable pain you can't guess, sometimes,
is it inside your skull or elsewhere.

It's dusk. The playground is an idea
gone bad. But someone is sitting on one
of the swings slowly turning in one direction,
then in the other. At the edge of what's
visible he sits dreaming inside his eye-
lids where all worlds are invented. Rubbing
the heel of one shoe in the dust as you,
sitting idly there, on a child's swing, would
rub yours. He's alone, he can't see you.
He can't know your envy. How you see
the colors of his world—bitter greeny green
and streaks of gold like pain so swift and deep
and final you can't feel anything, you smile,
perplexed, you say, *Is that all?*

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J. MITCHELL MORSE

The Madeleine and the Slate Pencil

Proust's well-known use of Bergson's conceptions of time and memory was more than fortuitous. If he had not found them in Bergson he would most probably have found them elsewhere or discovered them for himself; in any case, their chief function for his work was to suggest that he use the experience of déjà vu as a literary principle. The famous incident of the madeleine was not solely or directly due to Bergson's ideas; other writers had independently described similar experiences. Proust could not have read Kafka's diary of October 3, 1911, nor could Kafka at that date have read *Swann's Way*; but surely this diary entry records an experience analogous to that of Marcel with the madeleine:

> On the Josefsplatz a large touring car with a family sitting crowded together drove by me. In the wake of the automobile, with the smell of gas, a breath of Paris blew across my face.

Kafka always freely acknowledged his literary debts—e. g., to Dickens, to Flaubert, to Kierkegaard—but I find no reference to Proust in any of his published letters, in his diaries, or in the memoirs of anyone who knew him except Max Brod, who on this point says only that the two writers "never heard of one another." But an entry in Kafka's diary of October 18, 1921, is also of the kind we call "Proustian":

> It is entirely conceivable that life's splendor forever lies in wait about each one of us in all its fullness, but veiled from view, deep down, invisible, far off. It *is* there, though, not hostile, not reluctant, not deaf. If you summon it by the right word, by its right name, it will come. This is the essence of magic, which does not create, but summons.

Both Proust and Kafka knew both Baudelaire and Diderot, and may very well have retained both of the following pas-

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sages in subconscious memory; on the other hand, neither really needed such suggestions:

> . . . a sad man who breathes once again the air of his childhood in the odors of the church; . . . —Baudelaire, *Pauvre Belgique*, in the Pléïade edition of the *Oeuvres Complètes*, p. 1318.

> Here Jacques . . . tried to make his master understand that the word *pain* expressed no idea, and that it didn't begin to signify anything until it recalled to our memory a sensation we had experienced.—Diderot, *Jacques le fataliste*, in the *Oeuvres Romanesques*, Classiques Garnier, p. 509. Incidentally, cf. Wittgenstein's discussions of pain and the words that signify it, in *Philosophical Investigations*.

It is much less likely that either Proust or Kafka read James Russell Lowell's lecture "The Function of the Poet" (1855), in which he said this:

> The $\sqrt{-x}$ is nothing in comparison with the chance-caught smell of a single flower which by the magic of association recreates for us the unquestioning day of childhood.

Nor is there any evidence that either Proust or Kafka read Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876), which in Fit the Fifth says this:

> He thought of his childhood, left far behind—
> That blissful and innocent state—
> The sound so exactly recalled to his mind
> A pencil that squeaks on a slate!

The observation of such experiences goes back at least as far as ironic Plato, who in *Philebus* 34 a-b defined memory (*mnémé*) as "the preservation of sensation"—"something different from recollection (*anamnésis*)."

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ROBERT S. CLARK

Music Chronicle

A MUSIC LOVER NEEDS NO INDUCEMENT to visit the Salzburg and Bayreuth festivals beyond the fact that, like Mount Everest, they are there: dual annual celebrations of Germanic art, monuments to its durability and its international commercial allure. But this past summer seemed to offer rare additional attractions. The terrorism scare that followed the American strike at Libya and the election of Kurt Waldheim to the presidency of Austria worked to keep American tourists to a minimum in Salzburg; we were told by a local resident that the number in western Austria was down by two-thirds compared to the year before. And in Bayreuth Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung* was cast in every major role by singers whose native tongue was German, insuring that the cycle would be *echt deutsch* if nothing else. As it turned out, the absence of American tourists in Salzburg was hardly noticeable: it swarmed with European and Japanese tourists. And in Bayreuth the rewards of the *Ring* went far beyond the singers' idiomatic aptness.

Salzburg's fare was cultural haute cuisine with contemporary seasoning. There were star conductors—the festival's reigning postwar presence, Herbert von Karajan, and James Levine, the Metropolitan Opera's music director and tireless guest conductor; there were star singers in the operatic casts and in solo appearances, star instrumentalists and orchestras and ballet troupes. There were standard repertoire operas and a world premiere of a commissioned work by a respected living composer staged idiosyncratically by a renowned and "controversial" director—in this case, Krzysztof Penderecki's *Die schwarze Maske*, an opera in one act after a Gerhart Hauptmann play, directed by Harry Kupfer. There were *Liederabende*, solo recitals and theater, and lunchtime concerts in the city's Mozarteum. There was even the obligatory mild scandal: it was rumored that Agnes Baltsa, Karajan's own choice for the title role of the *Carmen* he staged a few seasons back and has since regularly conducted, withdrew this season after a disagreement with him about interpretation of her role. All of it differed very little in essence from what a dozen or more European and American festivals offered last summer, except that, as with haute cuisine restaurants too, Salzburg gets consistently higher ratings and so commands higher prices.

The ear relished much of what it heard, but the mind had to retrieve its satisfactions from unlikely byways. Practically anyone familiar with Karajan's work over the past several decades could an-

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ticipate what he made of *Carmen*. The production had a lifelike and conventional bent, swelling what was originally modest in scale to grand-opera proportions, so that the broad stage of the Grosses Festspielhaus did not swallow up a piece that began its life as an *opéra comique*. The Guiraud recitatives were used, and (on the evidence of the ear, unaided by a score) the music was the version that was internationally accepted before the scholars got to work on it in the sixties. The Vienna Philharmonic's sound was plentiful yet refined, ravishing to hear, and José Carreras as Don José and José van Dam as Escamillo supplied in abundance the reasons they are pursued by opera impresarios everywhere. Baltsa's withdrawal left a hole at the center: though her replacement, Helga Müller-Molinari, had an attractive and well-trained voice and looks that might set the staunchest young officer of the garrison to daydreaming, she could not convey Carmen's bravado and animal magnetism either vocally or dramatically.

But it hardly mattered: no one involved even remotely suggested a conviction that *Carmen* might be taken seriously as a drama of self-destructive wantonness and sexual obsession. Reverting to my earlier metaphor, this was a culinary *Carmen*, served up by Karajan and his cast like a lavish multi-course banquet for the eye and ear. Anyone who has followed the conductor's honorable and well-publicized years on the podium will recognize this as one characteristic element of his music-making: as far back as the sixties, Eric Salzman reacted to Karajan's "chocolate Beethoven."

I do not intend to assess here a remarkable career that is probably soon to enter its final stage, so I will add only that that career encompassed much that honors him a great deal more than this *Carmen*, and that the lone moment that stirred this observer on the evening in question was when the conductor, though all vigor and movement on the podium, revealed the recent decline in his physical condition during a curtain call with halting steps and a pallid, pain-tinged face.

At the other end of the scale was the performance by Christa Ludwig, a recital of mostly familiar German songs (and one surprise) by Brahms, Schubert, Liszt and Mahler, with Erik Werba at the piano. For more than twenty years, with her ample voice and instinctual grasp of this literature, she has been one of the world's two or three chief exponents of it. Yet, now and then, among the finely chiseled gems of the art have been some of a rougher cut: her concentration was not always perfect, and phrases were not always rounded off convincingly. Now her mastery is complete—a little too late for the voice, which can take on a bit of unsteadiness when under pressure or forced to move quickly. But on this occasion she obviously relished the opportunity to address the Salzburg audience in its own tongue and tones, to reach for the inner life of these creations and reveal it to the audience's perceptions. Schu-

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bert's rapidly skipping *Musensohn* was strenuous, but everywhere else her voice was rich and superbly managed, fusing word and note in perfect unity. The surprise was Schubert's *Ständchen*, D. 921 ("*Zögernd, leise*"), for alto and female choir. Joined by a bevy of fresh-faced and fresh-voiced maidens from the Choir of the Austrian Radio, she made this exquisite nocturne a few unforgettable moments of almost indescribable delight.

It could be said that, just as the Bayreuth festival owes its existence to the genius of Richard Wagner, Salzburg's festival had its origins in the genius of its favorite son, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. But the connection is superficial, and similarities between the two exhaust themselves quickly. It is true that Salzburg's first music festivals stem from the foundation of the Mozarteum Institute in the city in 1870. But the festival as we know it today really took hold only after the First World War, when Max Reinhardt, Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal—showmen all—signed on as artistic directors. The three (together with the conductor Franz Schalk) were responsible for creating Salzburg's eclectic mix of drama and music. And though today's programs rest on Germanic art, the intention of the postwar festival council was to revive the early European performing arts, particularly theatre, from the traditional *Jedermann* to *commedia dell'arte*, Gozzi, Goldoni and Calderón.

Bayreuth, on the other hand, was born in a blaze of individual creative vision, as a shrine where supplicants could imbibe the "music of the future." Time and two world wars have put that vision beyond our reach, but even today the place retains some of the trappings of a shrine. And at moments, when your guard is down, and one of the master's enchanting aural inventions sweeps over you, his spell might still take temporary possession of your soul.

At today's Bayreuth, the most active shade is not Richard Wagner's but rather that of his grandson Wieland. After World War II, he and his younger brother Wolfgang took charge of a festival discredited by Hitler's appropriation of it for Nazi culture. Soon Wieland's spare, still productions were synonymous with an exonerated and deracinated Wagner, and he and his imitators gradually reversed the direction of the composer's plummeting fortunes in the postwar years.

By stripping the stage of the accoutrements of nineteenth-century Wagner productions—the helmets and breastplates, the dragons and magical birds, the flames and floods and rams and steeds—Wieland accomplished two things: he eradicated the most obvious links between the composer and the dustbin symbolism of the master race and thousand-year Reich, and he detached the mythic sources of the works—particularly the *Ring*—from their specifically Teutonic embodiments, leaving commentators and auditors free to locate the dramas in a Freudian subconscious, a Jungian psyche or some other abstract and safely supranational dimension.

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Wieland died in 1966, and his artistic control of the festival, though not his intellectual authority, passed to his brother. Wolfgang's productions at Bayreuth had been, and continued to be, more pictorial than Wieland's and closer to the traditional in stage deployments. But, as expected, he opened Bayreuth to the brisker currents of international operatic direction that have coursed through the world's houses from the late sixties to the present. The high-water mark of this initiative was probably the *Ring* production by Patrice Chéreau in the Bayreuth centennial year of 1976, which recast the tetralogy as a sprawling anti-capitalist and anti-technological morality play—a *Ring* for the Green Party. (With Pierre Boulez conducting ably, it made, I admit grudgingly, an engrossing videotape for PBS.)

Elsewhere in the world, late in the seventies, a reaction to such elaborate staging conceits began to manifest itself. Kupfer, Chéreau, Götz Friedrich and their brethren continued to command critical attention, surely in part because, with discourse about music itself in the daily press so impoverished, these creators give pundits something to write about. But at the Metropolitan Opera in 1977, the team of director Otto Schenk and designer Gunther Schneider-Siemssen used *Tannhäuser* to demonstrate that the attempt to realize the *mise en scène* of Wagner's works as he describes it in his librettos was not doomed to result in stale artifice. Last fall these two were responsible for *Die Walküre* at the Met, a production with which James Levine inaugurates a *Ring* cycle to be completed by the end of the decade and recorded as well by Deutsche Grammophon.

At Bayreuth, Wolfgang Wagner, reverting perhaps to the prompting of his own instincts, chose Sir Peter Hall to prepare a new *Ring* to replace Chéreau's in 1982. Conceived in a romantic and fantastic idiom that the director himself traced to the composer, the Hall cycle took its lumps nonetheless from both conservatives and radicals upon its debut. When Sir Georg Solti, its musical director, declared he would not return to lead it again, there was some speculation that it would be withdrawn. But—though the program this past season now credits it as "after Peter Hall"—it has survived, either by virtue of the administration's confidence in its theatrical merits or from sheer economic necessity.

As delivered to audiences last summer, the production is inconsistent. In some details—the giants' masks in *Das Rheingold*, Hunding's dwelling and its forest surroundings at the opening of *Die Walküre*, the dragon Fafner—Hall seems to have reached back to Wagner's time and found his inspiration in the illustrations of the British water-colorist Arthur Rackham for the *Nibelungenlied*. But at other times—the third-act gathering of the Valkyries in *Die Walküre*, for example, and the confrontation between Siegfried and the Wanderer in *Siegfried*—the production relied upon featureless and barren canted platforms, with only the lighting to suggest the setting's par-

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ticularity. Such expedients were reminiscent of nothing so much as Wieland Wagner. Other scenes seemed stuck somewhere in between these extremes. *Rheingold's* climactic moment—the attempt to hide Freia behind Wotan's gold, which leads to his surrender of the ring—was vitiated by the ingots themselves, which were nondescript dun-colored shapes that snapped neatly into the giants' upright staves like so much unearthly Lego. The Gibichungs' hall in *Götterdämmerung*, though impressive through its sheer size, was less like a finished structure than the frame of a structure, for no discernible reason.

But on the other side of the ledger, some settings were marvellously effective—Siegfried's cave and forge, the Rhine boat-landing at the Gibichungs' hall, and Brünnhilde's pyre, for example. Best of all was the beginning of it all, at the bottom of the Rhine, where, by means of a huge mirror facing the audience, the Rhinemaidens swam in a pool hidden from direct view yet appeared to the audience to be moving both vertically and horizontally in the river's waters.

Amid these inequalities the stage action was conventional, and its effectiveness seemed to depend more on the aplomb of individual players than on the guidance of a directorial hand—not surprisingly, in a production now four years from its inception. Costumes—like so much else in this production—came from some middle ground between the traditional simulated breastplates and animal skins and the stark undecorated robes favored by Wieland Wagner's disciples. The Valkyries were particularly striking in what looked like leather wet suits, spotted to suggest armor, with long capes and headgear bearing just a hint of wings to tie them to tradition.

Whether history judges Wieland Wagner's role as crucial to Bayreuth's survival, and whatever the merits of one or another style of presentation, Wagner's music is the beating heart of the festival, and all else is secondary. The mammoth dramatic poem of the "festival play for three days and a preceding evening" pivots on the fate of two characters, Wotan and his daughter Brünnhilde. Both were done superbly at Bayreuth. Siegmund Nimsgern seemed a bit passive in *Rheingold*, singing with rich tone but exuding little of Wotan's authority. In *Walküre* he came forward and never afterward relinquished his place at the drama's center. His voice was equal to all the role's demands without loss of its dark resonance, and only an occasional too-homely gesture marred the impression that he was wholly inside the character of Wotan.

Hildegard Behrens' Brünnhilde was not blemished by similar lapses. This sterling artist was spellbinding throughout the stages of the goddess-woman's development. As Wotan's *Wunschmaid*—the creature of his will, his vassal and his favorite—she was eager and submissive; after her rebellious refusal to assist in Siegmund's slaying, her contrition and fear were manifest. As Siegfried's lover she

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was womanly and rapturous; her phrases in the passage beginning "*Heil dir, Sonne! Heil dir, Licht*" near the end of *Siegfried* soared poignantly. As the betrayed Brünnhilde in *Götterdämmerung* she was fierce and outraged, and finally, in her last hymn over Siegfried's body, transcendent. In the comfortably-sized Festspielhaus (capacity 1900), cushioned by the famous Bayreuth acoustics, her voice was solidly produced and never less than adequate to the requirements for volume. Only in the upper midrange did vocal unsteadiness now and then seem to dictate her use of her instrument, rather than her dramatic gifts and her musicianship dictating her vocal deployment. Hers is the only Brünnhilde in my experience that did not pall over the long run.

It was a misfortune that the contemporary rule for *Ring* casts held fast: there were two Siegfrieds, and both were seriously deficient. In *Siegfried*, Toni Krämer, who has only essayed the role recently, displayed a voice that was barely up to the mark and an inexperience that was at its most damaging in a couple of memory lapses. In *Götterdämmerung*, Manfred Jung, a fine Loge in *Rheingold*, sang Siegfried like the veteran he is, providing a professional rendering but not much in the way of appeal. For the rest, it was an uncommon matter of almost uniform excellence. On the evidence of her Fricka and Waltraute, Hanna Schwarz has a good shot at the singers' Valhalla, and, being rather young, a lot of time to get there. Her powerful, beautifully produced mezzo-soprano was always a joy to hear, and though neither of the roles she was assigned has a very broad range of expression, she made the former almost sympathetic and the latter absolutely riveting. The reception she got after *Götterdämmerung* for her Waltraute was the most universally approving of the entire cycle. Hermann Becht's Alberich was beautifully paced and rendered, free of excess, and Peter Haage's Mime was a potent caricature.

As Siegmund, Siegfried Jerusalem sang with plangent tone and was touching to boot; he outclassed his Sieglinde, Gabriele Schnaut, by a bit, but—aside from a little shakiness in her control of the highest notes—she measured up well. Lisbeth Balslev displayed the potential for another major career as Gutrune, and finally Aage Haugland's Hagen was solidly sung and full of quiet menace.

At Bayreuth, and at Bayreuth alone, we hear orchestra and voices in the relationship to one another that Wagner devised. The orchestra pit is sunk deeper than in the run of houses, and a canopy of wood reaches from the audience's side up and over to within a few yards of the stage. Thus the audience cannot see either conductor or instruments. The acoustic effect is to damp, but not dull, the aural impact of the orchestra in the auditorium and to make both vocal and instrumental sound seem to issue from the same plane in front of the audience. For one accustomed to hearing these works

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in a house like the Metropolitan, the effect was revelatory. In the Festspielhaus a singer like Behrens can use the shades and colorations of her voice without being swallowed up by the instrumental din of Wagner's heavily scored passages. (In the mid-sixties, when Karajan presented the first two operas of his finally aborted *Ring* in New York, and recorded the cycle in sequence, commentators made much of his "chamber-music-like textures" and the transparent, small-scale sound his orchestras produced. Though I have no evidence for the speculation, I wonder if his intention was to duplicate the Bayreuth effect of voices against orchestra.)

The Austrian conductor Peter Schneider, who often collaborates with Behrens, led the performances with vitality and assurance. Forward motion seemed his primary concern—that and a homogeneous collective sound that was enhanced by the house's acoustics. Climaxes were not lacking in punch, but the singers could always ride over them with ease. Schneider did not linger over the score's beauties, yet there was plenty of breadth combined with a ceaseless underlying pulsation.

The current Bayreuth *Ring* is scheduled to be succeeded in 1988 by a new one—stage director unknown—to be conducted by Daniel Barenboim. Already the factions are girding for battle. Near the entrance to the theater I was handed a leaflet distributed by a group called "Aktionskreis für das Werk Richard Wagners," urging Wolfgang Wagner not to shelve the Hall *Ring*, staged as it is "correctly, that is, according to Wagner's scores," but to retain it until he can make up his mind to produce the *Ring* again himself and thus guarantee that it will be done right.

Meanwhile on these shores the Metropolitan has started a *Ring* cycle whose intent would please the Aktionskreis. One can imagine the composer himself admiring each of the settings for the three acts of the Met's new *Die Walküre*. In the first, Hunding's rude hut was rendered much as Wagner's directions describe it, and such differences as there were did not weaken its appropriateness. The two climactic moments of the act—the hut's broad doors flying open to reveal the spring night at "*Winterstürme wichen dem Wonnemond*" and Siegmund's wrenching of the sword Nothung from the ash-tree's trunk at the scene's end—were both visually more convincing than their Bayreuth equivalents. The second act's "wild, rocky pass" was persuasively craggy and shadow-dappled, and the Valkyries' rock in the third act was a starkly lit and misty pockmarked summit.

The staging generally dovetailed with these naturalistic settings, but a few details were jarring. At the end of the first act, Siegmund and Sieglinde rush out into the night to escape from Hunding, but pause in full view of the doorway to embrace and then fall to the ground with gestures that suggest they are about to consummate

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their union. In stagecraft that otherwise sticks close to verisimilitude, this moment seems incredible and gratuitous. And the shattering of Siegmund's sword was similarly clumsy. Yet for every detail of this kind there was a touch that was in harmony with Wagner's aims, exposing the characters' inner being. One of these was memorable: after Hunding slays Siegmund, Wotan, who has been forced by Fricka to refrain from aiding him, approaches the corpse sorrowfully and closes its eyes.

It is a pity that, with so much to recommend the staging, the musical performance should have fallen so far short. After the blend and balance of the Bayreuth ensemble, the Metropolitan orchestra sounded coarse and compartmentalized. James Levine's conducting seemed governed by an unhurried, expansive, episodic conception of the score, but gave the impression that it had not been sufficiently thought out and rehearsed. Too often the music's long spans went slack, and momentum was sacrificed to passing effects. The pit seemed somewhat out of kilter with the stage action, too—a rare thing for Levine, one of whose chief virtues is usually his keen sense of an opera's dramatic progression. This extremely talented conductor is capable of much better, and perhaps he will get the upper hand as the cycle matures over the next several years.

Behrens was the Met's Brünnhilde, too. At Bayreuth, she had been radiant; in the New York house (capacity 3800), her voice was raw, pushed and colorless. Some moments still yielded exceptional singing, as when she beseeched Wotan to forgive her for protecting Siegmund. But more often it was hard to believe this was the same artist heard at Bayreuth. As for the others, Mignon Dunn was a strong Fricka, though not in Hanna Schwarz's class; Siegfried Vogel was a good Hunding, and Johanna Meier adequate but vocally inflexible as Sieglinde. Thereafter the qualifications have to be more severe. Donald McIntyre has been an admirable Wotan, notably in the Bayreuth production led by Boulez, but his vocal resources have now dwindled palpably; he was effective only in lightly scored passages such as the early measures of Wotan's soliloquy "*Als jünger Liebe*." Peter Hofmann was Siegmund: in its present state of deterioration his voice rarely engages a note fully, and when it does it is likely to be beset by a strong quaver. He scoops, slides and lunges at notes, and frequently arrives a bit on the flat side of them. Given his technical and artistic shortcomings, it is hard to account for his being cast in such a crucial part, except to note his bushy blond hair and good legs.

A much happier musical evening all around is the Metropolitan's current production of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, in the company's repertoire for the second straight year. Nineteen-eighty-six marked the second centennial for Mozart's masterpiece, a comfortable staple now but in its time a mold-shattering work. Everyone knows the history of Lorenzo da Ponte's adaptation of Beaumar-

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chais' play, banned in the capitals of Europe because of its supposed subversive nature. And in fact none of today's trendy stage directors lets Mozart's work get by without a gesture to demonstrate his awareness of the libretto's storied origins: in Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's production for the Met, when the peasants bring the count a floral tribute for renouncing his *droit de seigneur* (the first night with the bride of any of his retainers), they close the scene by hurling the flowers at him angrily as he turns away from them.

But it was not da Ponte's libretto, with its hedged and tepid anti-aristocratic flavor, that contained the seeds of a revolution, but rather the music. In this work and the subsequent *Don Giovanni*, Mozart's way with instruments and voices, noted by Haydn, Dussek, Niemetschek and other Central European composers who absorbed his lessons, cut a path for the succeeding developments of Beethoven, Hummel, Cherubini and Rossini, and so through Schumann and Weber to Berlioz and Wagner. Mozart might even be called the author of the continuous orchestral fabric in opera, for which Wagner is always cited in the textbooks, for it would unquestionably have been within his power to extend the matchless finales of *Figaro*'s second and fourth acts and *Don Giovanni's* two acts backwards, as it were, to the passages of secco recitative.

As a whole I think the Met's production is effective. Some have objected to Ponnelle's unit set, a towering modular columned wall, showing signs of decay, that serves to frame Figaro and Susanna's backstairs room, the countess' bedchamber and even, *mutatis mutandis*, the garden scene. But though it robs some scenes of intimacy, it works well enough with the plot's intricacies and can even be taken as a visual emblem of the condition of the old order.

On the two occasions I have heard it over the past year or so the music has been well served. In both, Kathleen Battle's Susanna was a delight. It is true that her vocal endowment is slight, but she accomplishes much with it: we simply have not heard the last-act aria "*Deh, vieni, non tardar*" voiced with such poise and purity of tone in a decade or more. Last season, Carol Vaness made the countess for once reminiscent of the Rosina of *Le Barbier de Séville*, but a slightly hysterical tinge to both voice and gesture was troubling. This season Elisabeth Söderström brought her considerable stage authority to the part, but it was not enough to compensate for the defects of her current vocal state; her taking of a low option in the second-act trio "*Susanna, or via sortite*" diminished the effect of the music's climactic points. Frederica von Stade's Cherubino is a well-known commodity, but seems fresh at every encounter with it.

This season brought a debut by a young American baritone named Thomas Hampson as the count, and it was one to hail. His strong, fluent and attractive tone and his considerable adeptness with it both seem to herald an important career. Already he demonstrates agility and security in the difficult role: it was a distinct plea-

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sure to hear this music sung, not barked. The Figaro last season, Ruggero Raimondi, gave a bumptious and belligerent performance that overcame the limits of his now somewhat labored vocal production and set a standard that this year's José van Dam, always an estimable artist, could not quite match.

James Levine was in his element here: much of this music is short in span and calls for precisely his kind of propulsiveness and fleet energy. And where, as in the finales I have alluded to, those spans combine in larger structures, Levine showed he could create a sense of always-building tension through tempo and dynamic contrast. Can he transfer these skills to Wagner's *Ring*?

The Paradise of Bombs

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MAUREEN MULLARKEY

A Medicine Show and Some Others

INCUMBENTS OF A SECULAR AGE, we are left with few repositories of revealed truth. Art is not one of them but that does not stop us from behaving as if it were. We keep on doing theology under the pretext of doing art. Exhibitions are assembled and attended with all the solemnity of a synod of bishops. The art press produces encyclicals, catechisms and doxologies that ground the proceedings in ecclesiastical authority and the language of sacred mystery. Artists acquit themselves like church fathers, issuing bulls in defense of their own work. The congregation, grateful for a sacramental vision that requires neither fast nor abstinence, submits to the Holy See of Art and genuflects every chance it gets.

The overt presentation of art as a charismatic activity is a rising current in the river of trends that irrigates the art world. Since January 1986, New York has showcased five exhibitions on religious or quasi-religious themes: *Choices* (which featured artists as converted worldlings dedicated to making their lives their art) at the New Museum of Contemporary Art; *Images of the Unknown* at P. S. 1; *Sacred Images in Secular Art* at the Whitney; *Jewish Themes, Contemporary Issues* at the Jewish Museum. The most recent was *Saints and Other Angels*, the so-called religious paintings of Audrey Flack at Cooper Union.[1] (In addition, the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art just launched its new building with a large exhibition called *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*.)

The Kahlil Gibran Award for undergraduate consciousness goes to photo-realist Flack. This was a travelling exhibit planned to coincide with publication of Flack's new book, *Art & Soul: Notes on Creating* (E. P. Dutton). A little bodhisattva, a few Hail Marys, a lot of show biz and you get the gist. It is as stagey as John Travolta play-

[1] Cooper Union-Houghton Gallery, October 28-November 18, 1986. The exhibition travels to the following museums: Alexander Breast Museum at Jacksonville University, Jacksonville, Florida, January 21-March 20, 1987; Daytona Beach Community College, Daytona Beach, Florida, April 6-May 3; Phillip Johnson Center for the Arts, Muehlenberg College, Allentown, Pennsylvania, June 18-July 26; Hoyt L. Sherman Gallery, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, August 10-September 20; Art Museum of Wooster College, Wooster College, Wooster, Massachusetts, October 15-November 30; Charleston Heights Art Center Gallery, Las Vegas, Nevada, December 20-February 3, 1988; Fine Arts Gallery, University of California at Irvine, Irvine, California, February 14-March 15; Danforth Museum, Framingham, Massachusetts, April 10-May 15.

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ing an avatar of Krishna. The show demonstrates what spirituality and religion mean lashed to the solipsistic evangelism of art's conceit. (It is also significant because of Flack's prominence in the Feminist Art Movement and because it has the active support of Lowery Sims, associate curator of twentieth-century art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.)

Taped Indian music accompanies the installation. The sitar takes us back to the ashram where we can meditate on Isis, Buddha, improvised goddesses, Hispanic Catholic statuary and a life-sized photo of Sojourner Truth. Flack's credo is stated in her text: "I believe in art. . . . I believe that through our art, and through the projection of transcendent imagery, we can mend and heal the planet." In practice this converts into a glutinous mandala, hieroglyphics and oracular sayings, copies of art book reproductions of St. Sebastian and the Last Supper, stars (the kind Matt Dillon wore) on foreheads and on halos. The best known of these "transcendent" images are the photo blow-ups of ornate madonnas that are sprayed with what looks like Day-Glo but isn't.

Devotees have their altar: a tin can with dead flowers and three battery-operated votive lights. A touch of self-mockery? Hardly. Flack's *Rainbow Christ*, the *summa* of karmic earnestness, is a good guide to the tone of the whole medicine show. An acrylic Christ, bleeding from a crown of thorns, turns eyes heavenward in that attitude of benign anguish beloved by florists and funeral parlors. Attached to the frame is a shelf with another fake votive light, loose pebbles, shells and cards printed with an inspirational message:

Listen to the Voice Within
You that knows the Truth
~ ~ ~
Inspire others with your
highest ideas.
Audrey Flack

A plaque invites the public to take something from the shelf: "The shells, stones and various objects on the altar have been collected by me at various sites throughout the world. They contain positive energy and are meant as an offering." Art is the New Gnosticism. Religion, divorced from the nuisance of content, is anything that sends the standees home feeling transcendental.

The exhibition is built on the fallacy that the depiction of objects of devotion, empty of imaginative participation in the piety represented, constitutes religious painting. It does not. These are ordinary still lives and portraits, pastiches of unassimilated religious symbols and bad paint. Madonnas vibrate like juke boxes, in raucous oblivion to the hunger for transfigured life that dignifies popular attachment to such icons as Spain's Macarena of Miracles (car-

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ried in procession annually through the streets of Seville). Flack's garish renderings condescend to the classes and cultures they plunder. (Flack & Sims had considered taking the act to the South Bronx.) The show's populism is as phoney as its candles. The arrogance of it is one more sign that our art swamis have forgotten the commandment against idols. In exhibitions like this, artists set themselves up as shamans (Flack: "The act of painting is a spiritual covenant between the maker and the higher powers."), aping traditions with which they have little empathy. Or worse, in which they have no faith.

It is the work's faithlessness, masquerading as mellow eclectism, that is in bad taste—*not* the popular sources of its imagery. Its vulgarity is in the substitution of jumbled religiosity for belief—the stew served up as Absolute Tao.

The religion of art is as rigorous as anything practiced on Plymouth Plantation. A just art does not dance to wanton ditties or walk disorderly. Instead, it takes us wading in grace, past the knees and all the way up to the *loynes*. There is, of course, the constant risk that the improving discipline of art might degenerate into pure pleasure. Excessive enjoyment of art corrupts morale and, like hot baths and *mixt* dancing, gives people ideas. The art divines are on their toes against any such threat to the social contract. Consequently, the National Gallery of Art had to hold onto its black steeple hat to justify its current exhibition: *Henri Matisse: The Early Years in Nice 1916-1930*.[2]

This period of Matisse's work—produced between the Russian commissions prior to World War I and the great Barnes mural, *La Danse*, of 1931-33—fell out of favor with the elect in the early fifties. The New Model Army took after it for being, in the catalogue's description: "A lazy and conservative interim, not to say a reactionary one . . . a moment of fatigue in his work, an unfortunate pose in the sacrosanct march forward." Forward that is, in art's inevitable progress toward heroic abstraction. Matisse's radiant, sybaritic celebrations of the French Mediterranean, with their easily readable images, were thought deficient in that asperity the Puritan conscience requires.

The National Gallery promises "a different way of looking at the artist" and "a new image of Matisse." We no longer need to pull our skirts back from the seductive charm of the *niçoises*: odalisques, untroubled interiors, flowers, palms, women with parasols, shimmering bands of water and sky. Art's selectmen have decided: They *do* conform to the prejudices of modernism and are theologically sound after all. It is now understood that they represent an advance in formal structure *despite* the figure. Even better, these sunny,

[2] National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., through March 29.

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buoyant works, re-examined in the light of doctrine, reveal "an insistent existential loss." The catalogue sighs about "anguish" and "intense mental asceticism." It puts on a long face and gives us the south of France as the Good Grey Painter's Slough of Despond.

The beauty of the *niçoise* period is a better reason for seeing it than the revisionist argument of the text. The catalogue's own handsome reproductions assert Matisse's freedom from any program but his own. His work rejoices in its own liberty. It comes close to laughter, jubilant arabesques of free laughter that are still as vital and fresh as they were seventy years ago. The small, magnificent *Femme au balcon à l'ombrelle verte* (1919), for example, quivers with glee and the heat of the sun. A black-stockinged figure in jaunty high heels holds a bold viridian parasol against a pale cobalt sea and the glow of a cerulean sky. The rounded volumes of the figure, echoed by swelling balusters behind it, is as tremulous as a mirage—an optical effect created by constant scraping and repainting. The distressed surface mimics the effects of light and alleviates the weight of a solid figure by letting it hover at the edge of suggestion.

In spite of itself, the National Gallery show affirms Matisse's greatness as an Arcadian painter. At a time when his own boyhood home was occupied by the invading Germans, Matisse reimagined Arcadia in terms that required no suspension of belief to be enjoyed, no act of denial to be believed. He imagined paradise in the full light of the Mediterranean sun, in plays of shape, and in the landscape colors of southern France. He imagined it in the human greed for life as we know it, in the exuberance of seeing and moving, in the nerve endings of his own fingertips, in the sensuous properties of paint and brushwork. However hard he worked, he let his hand go and surrendered to the pleasure of painting. This is an art of celebration in the fullest sense. It originates in that sustaining joie de vivre that remains credible despite the cruelties of the times. It does not serve any hortatory inclinations or the dogmas of any system. It challenges the New England of the modern mind by refusing to join us in the worship of our own despair. Matisse's Arcadia is available to the strong of heart, not merely to the well-instructed or the well-behaved.

If sensuality is the last locus of our Eden, it is also the site of our hell. This was the overriding impact of Joel-Peter Witkin's exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum.[3]

Trained in combat photography during the Vietnam War, Witkin is a photographer who works the way visionary painters do. He decides on a motif, often beginning with preparatory sketches. After-

[3] Brooklyn Museum, August 1-September 22, 1986. The exhibition is currently at the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, California, February 28-April 5.

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wards, he constructs the necessary studio sets and chooses the models that suit his intentions. He marks and highlights the negative and variously mutes the exhibition print, exercising the artist's initiative in ways that correspond to the manipulations of the painting process. The result is a disquieting phantasmagorical world that recalls the marginalia of late Gothic manuscripts. He creates a cavalcade of monstrous forms that seem as ancient and, in their dark way, as decorative as art itself. Instead of sphinxes and griffins, incubi and succubi, Witkin presents transsexuals, hermaphrodites, cripples, obese women, fetal corpses and severed heads. His grotesques are chimeras of an uneasy conscience alive with irreconcilable pain. They are sexual and psychological dream symbols, insidious with opportunities for deviance and hints of death, stated with hallucinatory clarity and surprising beauty. It is the perverse loveliness of the photographs, softened by printing and toning techniques into an illusion of age, that makes the images bearable. It is as if we had unearthed an antique, encoded record of the caverns of the mind.

The work resonates with allusions to the history of photography and of art, to classical, biblical and Christian mythology. *Harvest*, based on the sixteenth-century Italian painter Archimboldo's fantasy portraits composed of fruits and vegetables, is a cornucopia of satiated mortality. A serene death's head, set in profile on a rippling bed of vegetation that resembles a medieval jester's headdress, seems a feast of voluptuous decay. The nerve endings of its neck merge gracefully with the root tendrils of parsnips and scallions. It has come to fruition in death. *The Wife of Cain*, her face distorted by scratchings into a fanged mask, carries a skeleton on her back while a live snake twists around her distended belly. Pregnant with evil, the image shares the violent and hybrid wit of Mexican printmaker José Guadalupe Posada, who used lithography to jest with sin and death.

A zany strain of black humor runs through Witkin's concourse of witches and their familiars. His great chain of corrupted being links vaudeville with the world of "adult" movies. The *Angel of the Carrot*, a naked female seraph with cloven feet and a great feathered wing, sits sedately, as if at table, penetrated by a huge carrot. A heretical sabbath rite? Or is this the way fallen angels feed themselves? In *Choice of Outfits for the Agonies of Mary*, the model stands like a nude paper doll in the center of a display of S and M "toys" and wearables. *Canova's Venus* replaces Canova's marble lady with a graceful, veiled figure that is coyly but obviously—pull that drapery up just a tad, please—male.

Like Bosch, Witkin is an eloquent pictorial rhetorician. He speaks alarming and seemingly extemporaneous sermons in photo, shaping his images with a high degree of inventiveness. It is not a consoling vision. It is bizarre, disturbing, accusatory—and completely

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plausible. Partly because we believe a photograph, partly because of Witkin's mordant intelligence and command of visual traditions, these are among contemporary art's most convincing suggestions of the demonic. Witkin upends humanistic thinking, confronting us with capacities and appetites we prefer to keep hidden. His astonishing crucifixions, for instance, that use dead Rhesus monkeys with their laboratory code numbers stamped across their chests, are more than evocations of cruelty. They are harrowing meditations on the mystery of it. If this is man and the work of man, what is left to hope for?

Rodrigo Moynihan (Robert Miller Gallery) and William Bailey (Robert Schoelkopf Gallery) showed simultaneously in November. It was a useful coincidence that threw into relief the difference between breathing art and academic drill. Both men have a genius for abstract design, an extraordinary sense of measure that is expressed, at its most compelling, through traditional still life. Both have built a distinctive body of work from a single established motif: Moynihan, with the tools and flotsam of his studio; Bailey, with a medley of kitchen crockery. They each negotiate the difficulties of tonal painting with a confidence and apparent ease that yields impressive work. Yet the differences between them are more interesting than their similarities.

Each is a member of painting's aristocracy. A student at London's Slade School in the late twenties, Moynihan is a member of the Royal Academy and former professor of painting at the Royal College of Art. He has lived and worked in London and near Aix-en-Provence since 1957. Bailey, who received his BFA and MFA from Yale, is former dean of Yale's School of Art and continues a professorship there. He divides his painting time between his homes in New Haven and the countryside of Perugia. Neither man is impeded by either the struggle to live or to master his art. Yet it is Moynihan, the older of the two by twenty years, who has kept alive as a painter, maintaining an active dialogue with the objects of his reflections. Bailey has settled into a successful recipe, a visual equivalent to the complacencies of tenure.

Moynihan's still lives honor the act of seeing, the disclosures and transformations that take place for one who cares enough to look. Moynihan records what he sees. *How* he sees and the vitality of his recording touch keep a repeated motif from congealing into formula. He has a passion for visualizing, studying the same items of clutter from shifting vantage points—head-on or at skewed angles, along a shelf, on a sink top, a mantle. He circles his motif like a boxer, searching for an opening and the right moment to make contact. The drawing dances in and out of definition, subservient to lightfall, shadow and the demands of design. This agility, together with a gestural lightness and sympathy with the properties of paint, conveys all the life of a suspended moment. A luminous roll of pa-

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per towelling, crisp curls of tape unfurling over a table edge or the dark iridescence of a packaged light bulb owe their splendor as much to Moynihan's generosity toward the mundane as to his dexterity. He achieves an illusion of candor that convinces us that the subject of his probings is worth understanding. We trust his eye.

Four small nudes were included in the show, recalling Moynihan's early success as a figure painter. But these were bravura throwaways that clearly lacked Moynihan's full interest. They barely seemed to come from the same hand that produced such fine wartime figure groupings or the Tate's famous *The Teaching Staff of the Royal College of Art* from 1949-50. Moynihan's current attention is keyed to the still lives. It is in the closed corners of his own workspace that Moynihan is most observant, drawn by the possibilities of a few primary objects.

Bailey's own, more cautious, virtuosity is not in question. Flawless rendering, exquisite adjustments of tonal weight and the chromatic harmony of ochres, umbers and siennas give sufficient evidence of Bailey's gifts. There is no denying the calm, fixed beauty of any individual still life. But it is the beauty of tomb painting. The work holds its breath, frozen in some mortuary purpose. The work suffers the limitations of its own appeal, exercising a well-practiced skill at the expense of that sense of visual discovery needed to lend vigor and purpose to a constant motif.

In the end, it disappoints as a body of work. We expect more from Bailey's talent than a formula for making pictures. He has perfected one painting—a series of objects chosen for their architectonic elegance and arranged at eye-level across a table top and against a flat, muted background. It is replicated over and over in an approximation of line work. Bailey's habitual reworking of identical motifs transmits none of the power of interrogation or obsession that enlivens Moynihan. By now it communicates simply the tedium of manufacture. This has become a prefabricated product. The color scheme changes just as it would in a furniture showroom. The objects are rearranged or altered in scale. But it remains the same painting, reproduced with blasé indifference toward variety of texture and perspective or the fluid, mercurial play of perception.

The titles drip with snobbery—and a certain cynicism. Work that used to be called *Still Life with Compote* now carries names like: *Still Life—Via Angelo Massina, Still Life—Villa Aurelia, Still Life—San Donato.* The work bears no interior relationship to any locale but so what. Americans are suckers for a foreign accent. The titles flatter the pretensions of an audience that can afford trophies of Europe without Baedeker. These are straightforward commodities, perfect acquisitions for Exxon, Chemical Bank and Equitable Life. They have long ceased to be interpretations of a particular experience.

The doyenne of American sculpture, Louise Nevelson still takes risks with an elegant, rhythmic vocabulary that is distinctly her own.

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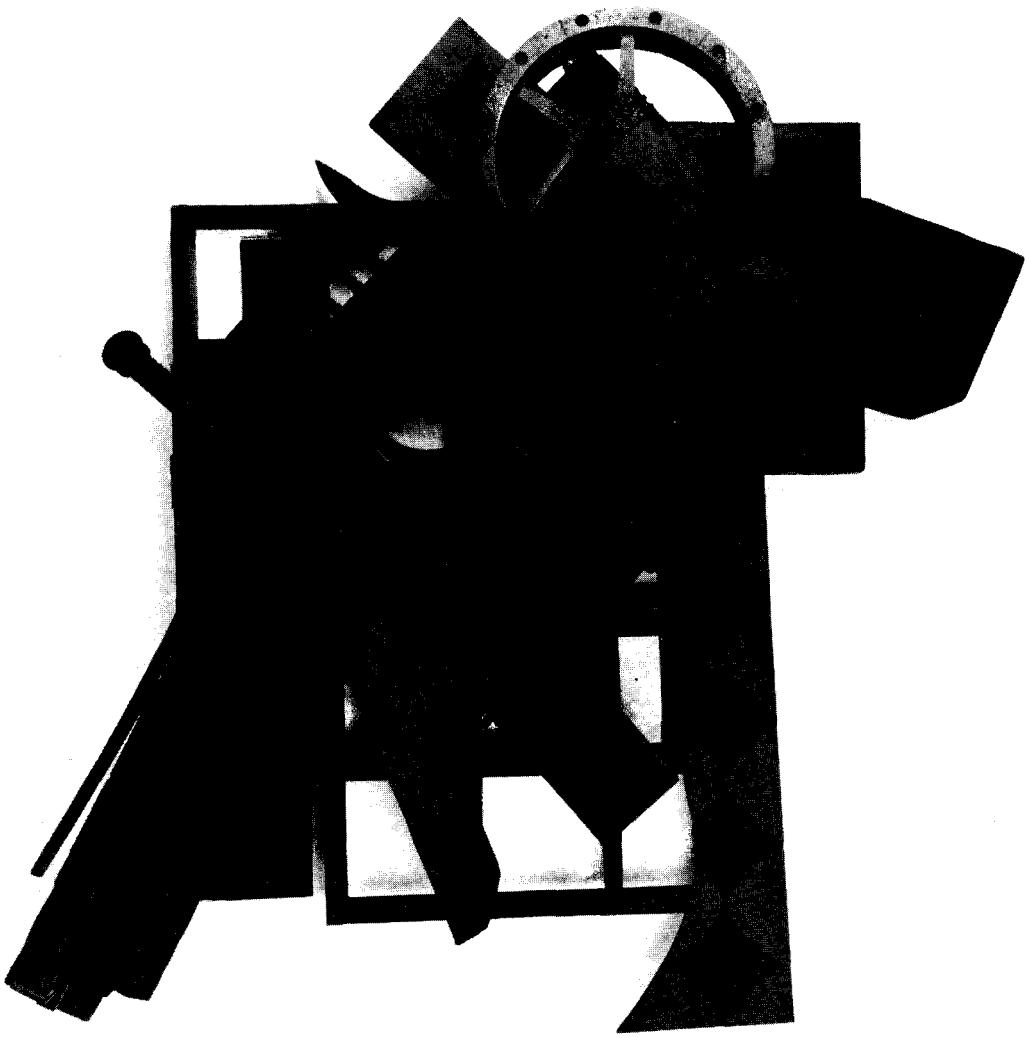

Louise Nevelson
MIRROR-SHADOW XXVIII (1986)
Wood painted black

Courtesy, The Pace Gallery

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In this season's dual exhibition, at the Claude Bernard and Pace galleries, she continued to amplify the properties of illusion with characteristic refinement and wit. The Claude Bernard show was particularly striking for its departure from hallmarked procedures. Small reliefs floated found objects and bits of junk metal over a paper ground in the manner of *papier collé*. Specific scraps retained their full identity, left unpainted with the unifying matte black typically used to subordinate competing objects to the cadences of a dominant pattern. The aggressive, untempered banality of chosen oddments—a piece of plastic dish drainer, a paper-covered wire hanger—sparred with the absolute rightness of their shape, color and placement. This delicate contest was held in check by Nevelson's eye for perfect pitch.

The show was greeted quietly. Much has already been written about Nevelson and her originality no longer seems new. Her emblematic ordering of random forms has become familiar. The subtle harmonies of her fretted, skeletal improvisations are immediately identifiable. Still, we cannot afford to take Nevelson for granted. She represents the kind of ambition that is almost extinct in an art market that feeds on the same frenzy that fueled seventeenth-century Holland's tulip mania. Now in her late eighties, Nevelson refused to accept commissions until she was in her sixties. Only then did she feel sufficiently "grounded," as she put it, to consider external directives. Her first loyalty was to her own gifts and the perfection of her work. Her achievement is a reminder, discomforting in its rarity, that excellence is paid for with one's life.

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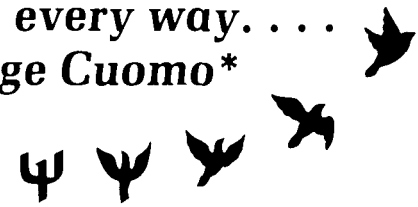

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RICHARD HORNBY

Theatre Companies in New York

WHAT DOES NEW YORK OFFER THESE DAYS to the serious theatre-goer? Aside from British imports and the occasional good revival, like last season's *The Iceman Cometh*, the commercial theatre provides very little. Prices are ridiculously high, and the range of offerings meager; even musicals are scarce. Theatres stay unused for months, then years, and begin to resemble those empty, rusting factories in our midwest, all monuments to greed and complacency.

Far better bets are New York's permanent theatre companies, which have been growing in quantity and quality even as Broadway and commercial off-Broadway theatre has declined. The permanent companies are nonprofit; they survive on grants, private donations, and subscriptions, in addition to individual sales. Ticket prices are reasonable (especially for season subscribers), yet the caliber of both scripts and performers is often high.

One such group is the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, which opened its twentieth year in October with a play called *The Artificial Jungle*. Charles Ludlam, the artistic director, resident playwright (all the company's plays are his), director, and principal actor, is most known for his female roles, but he is not really a drag actor, but rather a very good actor, period. When he plays a female role, you really forget that he is a man, despite the fact that in actuality he is plain, middle-aged, and balding. In the title role in his wonderful *Galas* (loosely based on the life of Maria Callas), for example, he was not exaggeratedly feminine, nor overly glamorous, nor ridiculously seductive; he just seemed to be a woman.

In *The Artificial Jungle* he did not in fact play a woman, but rather a male pet shop owner, Chester Nurdiger, with a passionate, restless wife and an overly attentive mother. He hires a strange drifter as an assistant, who quickly falls into an affair with the wife; the two murder him and toss his body into a tank of piranha fish to destroy the evidence of how he died. Haunted by guilt (the half-eaten husband wanders back in from time to time, like the ghost of Banquo), and bored by the burdensome old mother, they grow cool to each other. During a game of dominoes, they have a falling out, a gun is drawn, shots ring out, and it's curtains for both of them.

Like most of the Ridiculous plays, *The Artificial Jungle* is thus on its basic level a burlesque, this time of various *films noirs*. Such films have been parodied to death, however; if that were all there were to

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it, the play would be of little interest. Unlike most other parodists, Ludlam maintains a taut narrative line, so that you find yourself caught up in the plot even while you are laughing at it. Lines were delivered with an understated earnestness; pacing and timing were swift and graceful. Someone like Mel Brooks might well write outrageous lines like Ludlam's "Kiss me till I bleed!" or "You're counting cracks in the ceiling of your lonely room, while he's banging the woman you love!", but the Ridiculous actors say them with such simplicity that they are not only funny but engaging. Moreover, Ludlam is very well-read, and his plays are rich in literary allusions, which are, again, tossed off without special emphasis. *The Artificial Jungle* contains allusions to writers from Camus to Zola, but you can enjoy the play even if you miss them (and I am sure that I missed some).

Finally, Ludlam's actors bring a marvelous physicality to their acting. Black-Eyed Susan (a wonderful stage name) slunk, leaned, and slouched about the stage as the wife, Roxanne Nurdiger; Everett Quinton (who also designed the delightfully dreary costumes) managed simultaneously to be muscular, intense, and fatuous as the drifter, Zachary Slade; the two of them, although physically small individuals, were able to toss Ludlam's body around like a rag doll. Ethyl Eichelberger, a Ridiculous Theatrical regular like the others, portrayed the mother, Mrs. Nurdiger. Eichelberger is a male actor whose portrayal of women is the opposite of Ludlam's; the joke is that she is extremely tall, and quite obviously a man, yet wonderfully agile. She had a stroke in the middle of the second act that involved her staggering, spinning, and finally doing a complete back flip. Later, she could move only her hand and her eyes, yet still managed to command the stage. All in all, the Ridiculous Theatrical Company draws upon a delightful collection of talents, extending a great tradition of theatrical travesties that goes back at least two centuries, from Fielding's *Tom Thumb* through the burlesques of Shakespeare that were standard fare in the nineteenth century.

The Pan-Asian Repertory has been around for about a decade. They present new Asian and Asian-American plays, with actors who are mostly Asian or Asian-American as well. "Pan-Asian" covers a lot of territory and cultures, but the company, under Artistic Director Tisa Chang, really does mean it, having managed to include Japanese, Indian, Chinese, Korean, native Hawaiian, and Asian-American plays in its offerings.

Last fall, Pan-Asian Repertory presented *The Impostor: If I Were Real*, from mainland China, written in 1979 by three students there, Sha Yexin, Li Shoucheng, and Yao Mingde. The play is an amiable yet tough satire of government corruption in contemporary China. Nepotism and favoritism abound. To get a theatre ticket, a good job, permission to travel, or any other commodity or opportu-

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nity that is scarce and in demand, one must have the right connections with government officials. The Chinese even have a term, *zou houmen*, "going through the back door," to describe the practice of using such connections to get favors.

The Impostor is based on an actual scandal involving a youth who impersonated the son of a high-level army official to obtain favors. The play is set in the early seventies, when it was still the practice (since discontinued) to send all high school graduates to the country to live and work with the peasants. Naturally, many parents and students tried to use backdoorism to shorten the required term of service, or get out of it entirely. The charming young hero of the play, however, has no connections, and has thus been down on the farm for no less than eight years, unable to get back to the city with his girlfriend. By chance, a production of Gogol's *The Inspector General* is performed in the village; the hero lacks the connections to get to see that too, but a description of the plot inspires him to impersonate the son of an important official in Beijing, Venerable Comrade Zhang. Instantly, doors are opened to him; housed with the local section head, given presents, wined and dined, he lives a life of ease and (in Chinese terms) luxury. His disguise is eventually penetrated when his "father," the Venerable Comrade himself, arrives in the village. Unlike Klestakov in Gogol's play, however, the hero does not get away. Instead, he is tried and judged in a strong final scene, in which the comic tone of the play changes, with a vigorous indictment not just of the hero but also of the bureaucrats whose corrupt way of life made his deception a temptation.

It is a measure of the growing openness of Chinese society that such a play could be done there; indeed, one of the authors, Sha Yexin, has since become Director of the Shanghai People's Art Troupe and is held in high esteem. The trial scene, of course, is partly a sop to party leaders, implying that the Communist system is basically sound as long as there are strong men at the top to wipe out corruption, but it also carries a good deal of sincerity. An interesting detail is that Venerable Comrade Zhang agrees to act as defense counsel. Zhang, superbly played by Ben Lin, a mature actor with dignity and power, speaks movingly of the ideals of the revolution, and the need for bureaucrats to be answerable to the people. He acknowledges the excesses of the Red Guards and the Gang of Four with surprising frankness, maintaining that in that trying period, the people ultimately stood by their traditional party officials who were under attack; the officials must now stand by the people. All in all, the picture one gets of Chinese society in this play is positive. Corruption may be common, but it seems minor compared with that in other Communist (and many capitalist) countries, mostly involving small favors and minor luxuries. More important, the cynicism that pervades Russia and Eastern Europe has not set in; there still seems to be a large reservoir of idealism to be tapped.

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The actors of the Pan-Asian Repertory also project a high level of idealism. As Oriental Americans, they are not likely to become big commercial stars in our theatre, yet they are fully professional, bringing experience, skill, and polish to their work. It is difficult to single out performances within this well-balanced ensemble, but having mentioned Ben Lin, I should not leave out Keenan Shimizu, so unaffected and charming as the young hero; Kati Kuroda, hilarious as the officious Theatre Director; and Mary Lum, equally hilarious as the social-climbing Division Head. The Director, Ron Nakahara, staged the play deftly; a nice touch, for example, was the way in which characters, alone in a strange room, always examined the furnishings to determine the level of privilege and prestige of the owner. As a result of careful attention to such detail, and an easy, sincere acting style throughout, we always felt that we were actually in contemporary China, which seemed both strange and familiar.

The Circle in the Square is a company of long standing, devoted mainly to reviving classics and standards. In its uptown theatre on Fiftieth Street, it is officially a Broadway house, which has more to do with its union contracts (and hence, alas, its higher ticket prices than in its former theatres in Greenwich Village) than it does with its location. This fall they presented a fine production of Shaw's *You Never Can Tell*, with a strong, well-balanced cast headed by Uta Hagen as Mrs. Clandon and a superb Philip Bosco as the congenial waiter, Walter Boon.

You Never Can Tell is one of Shaw's best plays. I don't know why it has not received more critical attention, or major theatrical productions, for it contains in abundance all the things that Shaw is valued for: wit, charm, shrewd social comment, lively conflicts, vivid characters. The plot is a traditional one of boy-meets-girl: a young, penniless dentist named Valentine, living in a seaside resort in turn-of-the-century England, falls in love with an "advanced" young woman, Gloria Clandon, whose mother, a famous authoress, has been raising the daughter and her other two children in a hothouse environment away from England, on Madeira. "Modern" though the authoress, Mrs. Clandon, may think she is, she is actually an old-fashioned, nineteenth-century liberal, out of touch with contemporary movements like socialism. (She is very much like Roebuck Ramsden in *Man and Superman*, who proudly insists that he was an advanced man before Jack Tanner was born, to which Jack replies, "I knew it was a long time ago.") Using a reverse, anti-romantic approach to wooing Gloria (he attributes his feelings for her to "oxygenation"), Valentine soon has her in love with him, but alienated and ashamed for having given way to sentimental feelings her mother has taught her to despise. With the help of the Waiter, the two are of course united, and, along the way, Mrs. Clandon is even reconciled, after a fashion, with her curmudgeonly ex-husband, who just happens to live at the seaside resort as well.

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It is a thin, silly plot, not to be taken seriously because Shaw himself doesn't. The joy of this wonderful play is not in these twists and turns of alienations and reconciliations, but in the musical play of ideas, and the subtle motifs that underline them. For example, a recurrent theme of names and role playing winds through the play, through which sexual identity and social roles are examined from all possible aspects, culminating in a costume ball in the final act. A related theme is the Bergsonian one of rigidity versus flexibility, which is the source of a good deal of the play's humor; Gloria's overly rational modernness and despising of sentiment only makes her more susceptible to the blandishments of a young man who "learnt how to circumvent the Women's Rights woman before I was twenty-three." The play is dense with such motifs and image patterns; as R. P. Blackmur once wrote, Shaw is as difficult as Joyce when you really look into him.

Having once directed *You Never Can Tell* myself, I can attest to this difficulty. American performers often fail with Shaw, whose theatre is one of language and ideas, two commodities that have always been in short supply on our stage. The success of the Circle in the Square production was largely attributable to its director, Stephen Porter, who kept the language and ideas dancing lightly forward, with all their intricacy yet always with understatement and clarity. The acting was finely balanced; Uta Hagen, for example, was much better integrated into the ensemble than she had been the previous year in the lead of *Mrs. Warren's Profession* at the Roundabout. Amanda Plummer, a vastly overrated actress, actually managed to be simple and charming as the younger sister, Dolly, a tricky role since she has no part in the action, yet is onstage a great deal of the time, making clever comments that can easily become wearing. If one of the tests of directing is whether the actors are better or worse than usual, Porter passed with honors.

Another test of directing is the use of space. Here the Circle in the Square presented considerable difficulties; modeled after the previous downtown configurations, the stage at Fiftieth Street is a long thrust, which can, as in this instance, become fully in the round by adding a section of seats on what is usually the upstage wall. Directing in the round is always full of problems; for example, one must accept the fact that audiences will see a lot of the actors' backs, and make sure that the actors perform with their whole bodies rather than just with faces and hands. This the actors did superbly; Lise Hilboldt, as Gloria, for example, did a fine, Martha-Graham-style contraction when Valentine (well played by Victor Garber) suddenly kissed her, which could be read from anywhere in the house. Similarly, the costumer must make the actors look interesting all around. The costumer here, Martin Pakledinaz, managed this very well, though I found Plummer's costume, which is supposed to be gay and frivolous, overdone to the point of ugliness.

In order that no section of the audience see the same backs for

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too long, one must generally move the actors around more in the round than in proscenium; Porter managed this with great ease, so that one never felt that the movements were unmotivated. Furthermore, placement of actors in the round is tricky; audiences will accept seeing actors' backs (as long as it is not for too long a time), but are justifiably annoyed when actors cover one another, so that some of them cannot be seen at all. One trick is to have the actors closest to the surrounding audience sitting, with the central actors standing. Another is to place actors along lines that are continuous with the aisles, so that audience members sitting on either side of the aisle can look around the nearer actors at the farther ones. Porter arranged his actors superbly, despite the fact that the aisles of the theatre (unlike most theatres in the round, such as the Arena Stage in Washington) are not fully symmetrical; again, the placements always seemed unforced and natural, with meaningful, interesting groupings.

Finally, theatre in the round presents a design problem, since there is of course no scenic background at all. Such backgrounds are more important with Shaw than is commonly realized. G. Wilson Knight wrote that "to read Shaw for his 'ideas' without visualizing his stage directions is like reading Shakespeare in a prose paraphrase for children. . . . Color is not limited to foreign lands: when the action is in England Shaw does his best with terraces, deckchairs, gardens and views." *You Never Can Tell* has three settings, the dentist's office, the terrace of a posh hotel (where a complete luncheon must be served), and an elegant room in that hotel. The designer for this production, Thomas Lynch, did not quite capture the dentist's office (a challenge, since it must look more like a simple drawing room than such an office would today, yet still seem like a place for a dentist to work), but his designs for the terrace and hotel room were excellent. Using a gazebo-like ceiling piece and a lovely blue and white floor covering (when you haven't got a background, use above and below!), enhanced with beautiful white wicker furniture for the terrace and charming black and white furniture for the hotel room, he created the delightful feeling of an elegant, turn-of-the-century seaside resort.

Theatre at Lincoln Center has had a sad history. In the twenty years since the Vivian Beaumont Theater opened there, it has had some excellent actors and big name directors, but audience and critical response have been mixed at best, and there have twice been periods of several dark seasons. Even Joseph Papp, the Sol Hurok of nonprofit theatre in New York, could not make a go of it. Last winter, theatre returned to Lincoln Center in a major way, with a dual policy of doing standard works at the Beaumont and new plays at the smaller Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater.

Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's *The Front Page*, which

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opened in November, was an example of the former type. Written in 1928 by two former newspaper reporters, the play is hardly a classic, but it was highly valued in its time for its pungent dialogue, and naturalistic depiction of cynical Chicago newspapermen and politicians. Today, after so many journalistic plays, films, and television shows in the intervening years, some of its characters, like the prostitute with the heart of gold, the naive anarchist, the ruthless editor (he reminds me of Perry White on *The Daily Planet*), and the hard-boiled but decent reporter, seem like archetypes, if not stereotypes, but the play's dialogue still has some snap, and the plot is tight and amusing. There have been many productions of it over the years, and at least three films.

In the early seventies, I saw an excellent production of it at the Old Vic in London, with Dennis Quilley in the lead as the reporter, Hildy Johnson, supported by a fine British cast with surprisingly correct American accents. Except for the accents, this Lincoln Center version was not nearly so good. Richard Thomas, who played Hildy, is a television actor as innocuous as his name, with a thin voice, small features, little emotional range, and no comic sense at all. The rest of the cast, however, included some solid performers, especially Jerome Dempsey as the limitlessly self-seeking Mayor, and the protean John Lithgow as Hildy's ruthless editor, Walter Burns. The "chorus" of newspaper reporters awaiting the execution of the anarchist were all skilled character actors, especially Trey Wilson as McCue of the *City Press*, and there were several good performers in the many other small roles. The results were sabotaged, however, by the inept direction of Jerry Zaks, whose ground plan, blocking, pacing, and, above all, orchestration of the large cast, provided a case study in how not to direct.

The stage at the Vivian Beaumont is a semi-circular thrust, backed by a large opening that can be set to varying widths, or closed entirely; the original idea was to have a convertible theatre that could be used as a thrust, a proscenium, or anything in between. Zaks used the thrust, but directed, alas, in proscenium terms. Ground plan and blocking were rigidly frontal in orientation. Zaks and his designer, Tony Walton, placed a large amount of scenery, and a good deal of background action, deep behind the proscenium in such a way that only people in the center section of the audience could see it. The main entrance to the stage was placed upstage center; with furniture at either side of the thrust, the principal line of movement was thus straight down the middle, rather like a burlesque show runway. Actors marched stolidly down front, played to the center section—while covering one another from the side sections—then awkwardly turned about-face and marched back up. After three acts of this, I was ready literally to call a halt.

Zaks's pacing was fast, but sloppy; key lines went unpointed, and

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key words lost. (One of the movie adaptations of the play, *His Girl Friday*, with Cary Grant, has probably the fastest dialogue in film history, but every line is a gem.) The choral effect that the newspapermen should provide sounded more like a busy day on the floor of the Chicago Stock Exchange. Furthermore, although acoustics at the Beaumont are perfectly good (and no one in the audience is more than 64 feet from the stage), Zaks had his actors screaming at the top of their lungs, to the point where vocal strain became painfully apparent. This destroyed a lot of comic nuance; Burns's final line, for example "The son of a bitch stole my watch," should drip with ironic self-righteousness, but Lithgow screamed it so loudly and gratingly he sounded indeed like Perry White, or maybe Mr. Dithers.

It would be unfair to draw ominous conclusions about the future of Lincoln Center Theater from one weak production. Nevertheless, I cannot help but note the inherent difficulties of trying to develop a theatre company to fit a theatre building, and not vice versa. (Theatre at the Kennedy Center in Washington has had much the same trouble.) The other occupants of Lincoln Center—the Metropolitan and New York City Operas, the New York City Ballet, the New York Philharmonic—all existed long before the Center was even conceived. With solid traditions and loyal supporters, they have done well there. They certainly don't have dark seasons, and even bad conditions, like the acoustics in Avery Fisher Hall, seem ultimately undaunting. The performing arts require more than buildings and hardware if they are to succeed; they need time, self-confidence, and a sense of mission.

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BERT CARDULLO

Film Chronicle: Sid, Nancy, and Thérèse

TWO FILMS, BOTH BASED ON FACT, both about love in contrasting ways, cinematically as well as thematically. When juxtaposed, their titles are revelatory: *Sid and Nancy*, about the love of the English punk rocker Sid Vicious (born John Ritchie) and the Jewish-American princess cum groupie Nancy Spungen; *Thérèse*, about the love of the Carmelite nun Thérèse Martin for Jesus Christ. Sid's manager says of his bass-playing star, "He embodies the dementia of a nihilistic generation." Perhaps, but Sid embodies his own dementia, too, and so does Nancy: this is one reason they come together. Of Thérèse, who died in 1897 and was canonized in 1925, one might be tempted to say, "She embodied the dementia of a religious generation," except that hers wasn't a particularly religious generation. Thérèse's "dementia" is all her own, and all the more striking for this reason.

Sid and Nancy chronicles the descent into living hell and the death of the titular characters. They meet in London in the late 1970s; he resists her at first, as he does all sexual contact with women. Ironically, his fellow Sex Pistol, lead singer Johnny Rotten (born John Lydon), counsels abstinence from sex as well as from drugs and alcohol, and preaches a doctrine of cathartic, driving, musical violence: thrashing bodies and frenzied chords will obliterate the burden of consciousness at the same time as they vent the anger and frustration of an impoverished British underclass. In presenting its leading characters' existences less as symbols of social disorder, however, than as instances of personal confusion, and in its refusal to "explain" how these characters got where they are, *Sid and Nancy* has been called a kind of medieval morality play. It has also been called a punk *Romeo and Juliet*. Both labels have their pared-down truth. Sid and Nancy's love initially thrives despite the differences between their respective Cockney and Jewish-American families (we see hers, in a Philadelphia suburb, but not his) and cultures, and further, despite the built-in instability of their professional lives. (*When* Nancy works, she does so both as a middleman in drug deals and as a prostitute, administering sadomasochistic sex to a middle-aged, "respectable" client in one of the film's few comic moments.) Johnny Rotten, almost a Mercutio to Sid's Romeo, is in addition Conscience to his friend's Everyman, but a conscience to whom this

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unlikely everyman does not listen: he likes to drink, he can't resist Nancy, and he becomes addicted to heroin with her help. She is thus partly responsible for the breakup of the Sex Pistols after their American tour. She promotes Sid thereafter as a solo performer in England and then as the leader of a new band in America, but his drug-taking, boozing, brawling, *and* his relationship with her ensure his failure. Vice has tempted Sid; he and Vice have attempted to live and prosper together; and he and Vice finally destroy each other. Sid stabs Nancy in their room at Manhattan's Chelsea Hotel, nearly at her request. They had previously agreed to die together and now, since they are low on cash and desperate for drugs, she calls for a double suicide. She wants to die but he doesn't, so he stabs her and, in her (and his) general stupor, she bleeds to death. Four months later, Sid dies of a heroin overdose.

Sid and Nancy begins like a detective yarn from the forties, but it's kidding its antecedents. Sid is taken into custody after Nancy's body is discovered, and the film, in flashback—from his and Nancy's first meeting up to the murder—is triggered by police questioning. When the flashback is over, and after Sid's release from jail, a visionary final sequence begins. *Sid and Nancy* makes a mockery of the detective story, or *film noir* for the morally righteous, by failing to provide us with a "motive," with a psychologization of its characters' pasts, and by failing to explain how Sid escaped prosecution for Nancy's murder. (He wouldn't have, had he lived, but the film doesn't make this clear. In fact his manager, Malcolm McLaren, posted $50,000 bail for him; in the film we just see Sid being released from prison and we're left to wonder why.) The film also makes a mockery of the detective story by ending in pure fantasy, the source of which cannot absolutely be accounted for.

Sid is hungry for pizza as he leaves jail and manages, incredibly, to find a pizzeria nearby on a long, vacant stretch of land. After he eats, he steps outside to dance with three black boys, who provide the radio and who, for reasons unknown, know Sid's identity. Into their midst comes Nancy in a cab. Buoyant and beautifully dressed in white (through most of the film she's worn black), she beckons Sid into the cab and they drive off in an embrace. Much of this sequence is in gentle slow motion. Is this Sid's (drug-induced?) fantasy, just as the flashback was supposedly his? (I say supposedly, because flashback here is narrative convention—a way of keeping our minds on the grim present at the same time as we get the grimy past—rather than a recounting of the past from Sid's exclusive point of view.) Is it the director Alex Cox's knowing imposition of a happy ending on an otherwise unhappy film? Probably a little of both. What is clear is that Sid is at his most relaxed in the film when he is dancing with the young blacks, and that Sid and Nancy are at their happiest in someone's imagination, be it Sid's or Cox's.

I've given this ending to reveal how an otherwise realistic film

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uses fantasy both to affirm its realism by contrast and to extend its imaginative province, by making fantasy grow integrally out of reality and comment on its realistic conventions even in this unconventionally realistic film. I've deliberately made little mention of Alex Cox, the man responsible for *Sid and Nancy*, because, for the most part, his directorial hand does not intrude on the film until the end, and then it does so with aesthetic justification. Cox is deft at ending a scene, if not *in medias res*, then precisely at the moment when we've seen and discerned enough. One example: the morning after Sid and Nancy have made love (and he has shot heroin) for the first time, in a friend's apartment, they awaken and languorously decide to make love again. But they're harshly (and tellingly) interrupted by the friend, who, immediately upon getting up, starts banging on his guitar a few feet from them. Sid and Nancy unhand each other and shout at their host to stop; he does so and, before it can degenerate into morning small talk, bathroom byplay, or kitchen high jinks, the scene ends, its point succinctly made.

Cox's shot selection is equally deft. The cinematographer Roger Deakins gives him an appropriate palette of washed-out color with which to work, and Cox knows neither to rub our faces in it nor to pull us clinically apart from it too often. He doesn't want to place us in the same position as Sid and Nancy, nor does he want to put us above them; we're left squarely in the limbo that is the privilege of the spectator: separate but equal. There are two wonderful exceptions to this rule. The first occurs shortly after Sid and Nancy have met. She has been ripped off for fifty pounds by a drug dealer and is crying about it up against a large brick building; Sid comes outside to comfort her. They talk, he gives her money, she says that she'll score drugs for him. This is the crystallization of their relationship, of their dependency on each other and on drugs (he apparently hasn't done any up to now), and Cox makes sure we don't miss it. He cuts to an extreme long shot of them up against the same brick building, and we suddenly get perspective on their situation. So far away is the camera that Sid and Nancy nearly disappear into the bricks: for a moment, we see only the bleak, bleary environment that surrounds them. We see how small and helpless they really are and how art, this art, is magnifying them. We see how, for all their living for the moment and for themselves, they are part of a larger scheme of things, temporal and spiritual, which they do not comprehend.

The second shot occurs a bit after this, but before Sid has gone on the Sex Pistols' American tour. He and Nancy need money to support their growing drug habit—Sid's manager, wisely he thinks, gives the Sex Pistols little money but provides for all their needs except drugs—and she is calling her mother in Pennsylvania to ask for two hundred dollars. They're in a telephone booth, and Cox's camera comes up close on them to emphasize their entrapment in

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addiction and their entwinement with each other. Nancy's mother doesn't believe her daughter's story that she and Sid have just married and expect a wedding gift, preferably of cash; the mother refuses to send the two hundred dollars, and Nancy shows her spoiled-brat origins by becoming hysterical, hanging up, and smashing several panes of the glass booth. Hers is a pathetic attempt, on one level, to break out of the booth, and on another, to break out of her life's incipient downward spiral. The camera holds on Nancy and the helpless, befuddled Sid throughout this scene, suggesting to us that there will be no escape for them and creating in us an equivalent of their suffocation.

The above comments on Alex Cox's direction presume that he made *Sid and Nancy* for everybody, not for the cultists who would have this couple either glorified or trashed—it doesn't matter which, since the subject of a cult film isn't people, it's style and attitude, and cultists are always willing to have these defined for them, to have the cult redefined if need be. Perhaps Cox began *Sid and Nancy* as a cult film—this is not so improbable, since his first feature, *Repo Man*, was made as one—but learned something about and from Sid and Nancy along the way and decided to redirect his aims. However he began, he ended with two human beings, not simply a punk rocker and his groupie. His film is about their love, not about punk music, not about punk rock stars, not about their fans and groupies. It is about Sid and Nancy's particular love and dependency, which, underneath the punk trappings and mannerisms, are no different in their respective intensity and imbalance from those of many young couples. In fact, one could argue that their love and dependency are, of all things, old fashioned. Nancy becomes enamored of Sid because he's a star, becomes further enamored of him because he initially resists her sexual advances, then falls in love with him when he warmly responds to her. Sid falls for Nancy because she's persistent and vulnerable (the odd American out on the London punk scene), gives generous doses of two things he thought he didn't like or need, sex and heroin, and offers him companionship—something else he thought he didn't want or need, and something his adopted surname seems designed to discourage. When he leaves without her on the Sex Pistols' American tour, she's frantic. When he's been away for a while, he calls, desperate to have sex with her—even Nancy is surprised that he doesn't just go to bed with a groupie.

But Nancy is not so liberated a woman as she would like to think. She's a Jewish-American princess who, for unexplained reasons, has attached herself to a shooting star instead of a Jewish-American prince/professional and who gets frustrated and angry when her star stops shooting. What she doesn't realize is that she introduced Sid to the drugs that are derailing his career; that, because she is so possessive of him, his talent, and his persona, she is unwilling to

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share any of them with his fellow band members, much to the crippling of their image and their music; that she has wanted all along to bring him down to her own level at the same time as she has wanted him to rise above it, to be a success. Shortly before her death she expresses to Sid her self-loathing and despair: "At least you used to be something. I've never been anything." Nancy has never been anything, and, it appears, Sid never wanted to be anything but became something almost in spite of himself. He is an oddly unassuming, even lazy, star (unlike Johnny Rotten, whom we, along with Sid, see cultivating his image on American television) who seems almost to be asking someone to take that stardom away from him; Sid's as baffled by the overwhelming American response to the Sex Pistols as Nancy is fueled by it. He kills Nancy because she wants to die, then in effect kills himself four months later because, with her gone and his musical career at a standstill, he has nothing better to do. Unfortunately, these two were made for each other. By chance, they found each other. And it is to Alex Cox's credit that he keeps this a tale both of fate *and* chance. Sid and Nancy destroy each other, but it's not for a moment clear that, had they not met, their ends would have been radically different. She would have found her Sid, and he his Nancy. This diminishes them in so-called tragic stature, but it brings their story closer to truth. Which is what Cox wanted: there was art enough in his having chosen to tell their particular story in the first place.

The performances of Gary Oldman and Chloe Webb, the Sid and Nancy, are nearly perfect. Neither actor makes the mistake of attempting to play a social symbol or a pop myth. They play two people, and they root their performances in the reality of each moment, not in their ideas (and ours) of how a punk rocker and his groupie would behave. Of course, Cox's script (co-authored with Abbe Wool) helps them. Two instances: Sid's questioning by police at the start of the film, and Nancy's telephone conversation with him when he's on tour in the United States. In the former instance, we get our first look at Sid, and Cox wisely makes it our first *look*. Sid says nothing for a long time despite the detective's repeated question, first in the hotel room, then at the police station, "Who called 911?" We don't get the lurid cliché—a tough-talking cop and a belligerent Sid—we get the simple truth—a determined cop and a bewildered Sid. It is less that Sid refuses to speak, for his own protection, than that he doesn't want to speak yet, isn't yet able to. The detective senses this, and he watches Sid running over the events leading up to Nancy's death. Sid is thinking about *Nancy*, not himself, and Oldman is able to reveal this without saying a word, without shedding a tear, without looking at anything or anyone. He's in the moment: the actor Oldman knows that Sid will never see Nancy again, and this becomes his "handle" on the scene. What gets Sid to talk? The detective offers him a cigarette, at which Oldman stares

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for a bit before accepting: he takes the time to pull himself out of his reverie and back into the world of his needs.

The night before Sid departs for the Sex Pistols' American tour, he and Nancy are in bed together. He's asleep and she wants to have sex again. She wakes him up and repeatedly tries to seduce him, which he resists; he wants his sleep but she won't let him have it, so he angrily dresses and leaves. When he calls Nancy from the United States, hungry for sex, she becomes impatient with him because she must service one of her sadomasochistic customers and because there's simply nothing she can do for him. She says, "What do you want me to do, put it in a box and mail it to you?" The script and Chloe Webb are careful not to let this scene lapse into cliché, into her revenge, spoken or silent, for his spurning her the night before he left England. Webb stays in the moment. She's thrilled to hear from Sid because she thought she'd never see him again, but she never lets herself become completely absorbed in romantic conversation with him: she has her own business to tend to, her own financial needs to take care of. Paradoxically, her hanging up on Sid reveals at the same time the practical side of her personality that will keep the two of them afloat, for however short a time, and the impulsive side that would have found her another Sid had Sid Vicious not come back to her.

Of Catherine Mouchet's acting in Alain Cavalier's *Thérèse*, I must say something similar to what I've said about Gary Oldman's and Chloe Webb's: it's always in the moment, never in the clouds. And this is quite an achievement in a role whose foundation is this woman's overpowering love for Jesus Christ. How does Mouchet realize her performance? In two ways. She makes sure that she loves the person of Jesus Christ, not the idea of God. This is somewhat easy, since she is playing a Carmelite nun, and the Carmelite order's *raison d'être* is its members' love for the man who tells them again and again, "I am life," "I am life," "I am life." To the Carmelites, Christ is husband, father, son; upon initiation into the order, each nun goes through a wedding ceremony, and we see Thérèse go through hers. (The Carmelites thus make explicit the implicit marriage of all nuns to Christ.) In her white gown, with flowers in hand and in her hair, blushingly accepting congratulations from her sisters, she begins to give us a sense of Christ's presence next to her. She's convinced, so she convinces us. There's no need for gimmicks, for visions or voices, and Cavalier intelligently gives us none. Mouchet had to create an objective correlative for her love, however, if she was fully to give us herself as well as herself in devotion to Christ. And that correlative was ready-made in the life around her, in her fellow nuns, three of whom are her actual sisters! Thérèse's love of Christ is visible in her love for these women who are his wives, his children, his mothers. Her youthful happiness, sincerity, and self-sacrifice are like a gift—a needed gift—from God to this convent of older and in some cases dour women.

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Mouchet is helped by Bernard Evein's sets and Cavalier's camera, and even by her nun's habit. Since we're in a convent, moreover in one whose inhabitants live a hermit's life of complete poverty and virtual silence, there's no ornament, no set decoration to speak of: only what furniture and articles are absolutely necessary. But Cavalier and Evein take starkness one step farther: there are no walls, no doors, only a huge backdrop. In other words, there are no points of reference in the background and no points of interest, of "design," in the middle- and foreground. The one point of reference is the screen's frame, and when the human face enters that frame, it automatically gets our undivided attention in all its expressiveness and splendor. I say the human face and not the human form, because the nun's habit disguises the body, and the hood serves as an additional frame for the face. Mouchet has no competition; when she's on screen, we watch her face, every part of it, and we don't need close-ups. Cavalier's camera, like Alex Cox's, stays back for the most part, but not too far back. He doesn't want to give us Thérèse's experience, to immerse us in it, the way Carl Theodor Dreyer immersed us, through close-ups, in Joan's in his *Passion of Joan of Arc*; nor does he want to keep us at a certain remove from Thérèse's experience, to offer it up primarily for our contemplation, the way Robert Bresson offered up the curé's experience in *Diary of a Country Priest*. Bresson did this less by means of long shots than by non-expressive acting, an emphasis on the physical world—the world of objects—which sets off the ineffability or interiority of the spiritual, and narrative trebling—through the representation on screen of written pages from the curé's diary, through his voice-over of those pages, and through the depiction on screen of the actions described in them. *Thérèse* is also based on a diary—hers, which was translated and published all over the world after her death. But, though we see her diary—the book itself—we do not look into its pages and we do not hear anyone's voice-over of passages from it. The action of this film is unmediated, as is its representation of space, generally.

Cavalier doesn't often fragment space into objects and people, or into shot and reverse-shot between Thérèse and the other Carmelites in conversation. They don't talk that much, anyway: much of their day is taken up by prayer, by chores, by meatless, skimpy meals, and by mortifications of the flesh. And Cavalier's camera usually takes in the whole scene, all at once. He's aided by Camille de Casabianca's screenplay, which consists of a series of nearly independent tableaux, and by Philippe Rousselot's cinematography, which plays the black-and-white of the nuns' habits against the muted sumptuousness of the colors behind them. The women—their faces—thus stand out all the more, and most of all because of the way the set is lighted. Cavalier has said that the principal reference in this lighting was Monet, but this is misleading, since the main character in Monet's paintings is the light—the human figures are

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distinctly secondary and, where they occur, take on a certain motionlessness, even shapelessness. By contrast, the human *face* is primary for Cavalier and, in order to accentuate it, he has most of the light fall on the foreground and very little of it spill into the background. Cavalier edits within the scene through light and through simplicity of design rather than "outside" the scene through cutting. In this sense he is the theorist André Bazin's ideal director in *Thérèse* (he has made eight other films, none of which I've seen, in a career that began in 1962). He is not Bazin's ideal director in another sense, since he doesn't render the real world on film but instead a theatrical set filled with faces. I can recall only one shot of the outdoors (of a young nun fleeing the convent over a wall): Cavalier doesn't record the mysteries of God's universe to be found there, in the manner of Bazin; rather, he goes inside to tell the story of one woman's love of Christ. And once inside, he lights *her* and the other Carmelite nuns, he lights *people*, not an environment. The result is that the configuration of light becomes a metaphor for the Carmelite nuns' lives.

There is no "background" to these lives—no concern with social and political events outside the convent, little or no contact with anyone outside, little or no information on each nun's past. What the film narrates is the absolute present, in which the sisters are simply themselves, their bodies seen nearly without perspective, their words and actions unaccompanied by background music. Nothing matters, or should matter, except Christ's presence in their midst and their total devotion to him. He is the past, the present, and the future; he is united with them in eternity. Cavalier neither brings us too close to the action nor pulls us too far back from it, because his concern is not primarily with Thérèse's "passion" and not primarily with the mystery of Christ's justice: it is with the *marriage* of the two, of Thérèse Martin and Jesus Christ. Bresson keeps us at a distance from the action of *Diary of a Country Priest* because his concern is ultimately with the mystery of God's justice in its bestowing of limitations, stupidities, and failures on the curé and in its striking him down with stomach cancer—none of which the curé can accept until the very end when he utters, "All is grace." Appropriately, the final image of this film is a cross—the cross on which Christ, at first believing himself forsaken by his God, was crucified. The final image of *Thérèse* is this young woman's pair of shoes. She has died of tuberculosis (though we do not see her die) at the age of twenty-four, and has happily regarded her illness all along as Christ's gift so that she can join him sooner in heaven. She has taken her shoes off, as it were, so that she can enter the marriage bed with Christ, the prospect of which she and another young Carmelite had discussed with glee earlier in the film. There is no mystery; there is only love, there are only Thérèse's shoes, which trod with humble and unswerving certainty a path leading directly to her Christ.

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If there is no mystery, no tension, no conflict, wherein does the drama of *Thérèse* reside? Isn't it true that there can't be any drama in Thérèse's story, since she is perfect, is a saint? She even says (humbly!) at one point, "I want to be a saint." Well, she became one in 1925. Once she knows she is dying of tuberculosis, she doesn't even fight *that*: she accepts her affliction as the benign will of Christ. Part of the drama in *Sid and Nancy* is in the very portrayal of such wildly imperfect characters: we keep looking for their redeeming features, for the *reason* for their portrayal. The drama in Jacques Rivette's *La Religieuse* (based on Diderot's novel), to which *Thérèse* can be seen as a kind of response, is in the *resistance* of Suzanne Simonin to her vocation, in her longing to leave the convent, where she has been sent by her family against her will.

Thérèse, in contrast to Suzanne, must fight to get into the Carmelite order, and therein lies the only real drama in her story. Two of her sisters have entered the convent before her, and the Church strongly discourages her on account of her age—fifteen. With the help of her father, Thérèse takes her case all the way to the Pope and is at first denied, then a short time later approved. What other drama there is in *Thérèse* takes place *around* her and serves only to set her saintliness in relief. Another young nun, Lucie, has both a strong desire to leave the convent and a strong sexual desire for Thérèse; the latter merely discourages Lucie's passes in as gentle and loving a manner as possible. An old nun reveals to Thérèse that, before entering the convent, she had been married to a man who died in a fall from a horse; she shows the solicitous Thérèse her husband's picture, which she has illicitly kept all these years. The mother superior is a bitter woman who knows that some of the nuns would like to see her replaced and that her convent does not enjoy a good relationship with the nearby town. She quarrels sharply with the young doctor who diagnoses Thérèse's tuberculosis, refusing to administer his prescribed treatments or to give her morphine for the severe pain. Thérèse quarrels with no one, not even the mother superior, and she suffers her pain without complaint.

Cavalier never attempts to "explain" Thérèse's love affair with Christ beyond giving the incident that convinces her of her vocation. At the start of the film, she prays to Christ for the soul of a man condemned to die; before he's executed, he kisses the crucifix, and Thérèse interprets this as a sign of her special relationship with Jesus. Cavalier doesn't attempt to explain, either, why four daughters from one family chose to enter a religious order, especially one so demanding. Their mother is dead, and their father seems anything but displeased at his daughters' choices, even though he sees little of them after they enter the convent, despite its closeness to his home—and when he does see them, it's through a wall of iron bars and only for a few minutes. Explanations for the four women's existences, and particularly for Thérèse's, are unnecessary: any explanation would pale beside the fact of those existences. The same

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is true of the lives of Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen. Is *Sid and Nancy* meant to be a cautionary tale? Hardly. Who needs to be cautioned against self-destruction of this extreme kind? And if so strong an impulse is already present, there won't be any stopping of it. Is *Thérèse* intended to be an exemplary tale? Of course not. How could anyone be convinced to lead a life of such self-sacrifice?

Sid and Nancy and *Thérèse* are at opposite extremes, and each is its own reason for existence. They leave it to other films to chart the vast sea of subjects in between them. Thérèse *is* too good for this world, she is utterly otherworldly, and to the next world she goes. Case closed. We may wonder at her, but we don't have much in common with her. Cavalier's camera stays just close enough to her to remind us of her humanity, and just far enough away to suggest to us her sanctity. Sid and Nancy are, no, not too bad for this world, but rather too bad for each other and for themselves. Thérèse did everything she could to make life less at the same time, paradoxically, as she was making it more. Sid and Nancy do everything they can to make life more at the same time, paradoxically, as they are making it less. Thérèse dies in joy and faith; Sid and Nancy, in sorrow and despair. We may pity or despise these two, but we don't have much in common with them, either. Cox's camera stays just close enough to them to remind us of their humanity, and just far enough away to suggest to us their grotesqueness.

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MARCIA B. SIEGEL

Brat Ballerina and the Forces of Evil: A Romance

THE COVER OF *DANCE MAGAZINE* IS USUALLY A SHOWCASE depicting dancers as glamourous, joyous beings, icons of the fantasy culture inside its pages. Last November a haggard, middle-aged woman in a black monk's cowl stared dolefully out from under the logo, like a prisoner who'd been hidden away for years in a forbidden part of the dance world. The shockingly dissipated face belonged to thirty-four-year-old Gelsey Kirkland, whose autobiography, *Dancing on My Grave*,[1] has become the dance year's literary phenomenon. A best-seller, an exposé, a confessional, the book seems to affect everyone differently. With Kirkland's cooperation, *Dance Magazine* treated it as a moral lesson for an adolescent readership, and someone wrote in a couple of months later protesting that the cover was unflattering to the memory of Kirkland's better days. The wish to see dancers as beautiful even when they're not is basic to dance world psychology, and probably one of the reasons for Kirkland's downfall as well. But the discrepancy between image and reality is only one of the complex issues raised by this deeply disturbing book.

Dancing on My Grave is the story of one life in ballet, from playful early aptitude through classes, professional aspiration, youthful stardom, and then the emotional unreadiness and inability to cope, horrible decline, and a supposed recovery from mental and physical wreckage. I suppose the main reason for its popularity—frankly exploited by the publisher though it occupies less than one-fifth of the book—is Kirkland's drug addiction and reform. Most of the publicity she's received is voyeuristic in tone, like the headlines given erring basketball players. How we love to see our culture heroes fall, and even more, repent. But like any behavior so thoroughly self-destructive, Kirkland's addiction was only the worst phase of a much deeper and longer-lasting syndrome. In her book she seems to be explaining how it happened, but like a politician caught spying, she asks to be excused without actually having understood what she's done. There's a difference between recognizing your bad behavior for what it is, and regretting the consequences of it.

In that sense, Kirkland's story is all about placing the blame

[1]DANCING ON MY GRAVE, by *Gelsey Kirkland* with *Greg Lawrence*. Doubleday & Co. $17.95.

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somewhere else. Writing in a melodramatic style suited to a gothic romance ("They would bend my body but not my will."), she casts the men in her life in an endless variety of love-hate roles, starting with her father, writer and alcoholic Jack Kirkland. George Balanchine was her next evil protector, followed (though never displaced) by lovers, teachers, drug dealers, managers and doctors, all of whom Kirkland asked for life, for how to live her life, and all of whom she accuses of contributing to her destruction. She wants to believe that her co-author and husband, Greg Lawrence, is the first man to be kind to her, and through his devotion alone has redeemed her life. No one would wish her mistaken, but the odds aren't terrific.

Her performances now are controversial. Apparently restored to strength, she's "too old" to be the technician she was, even if she could reverse the damage she's done to her body with drugs, anorexia, poor nutrition, and long lapses in training. She claims to have found the truly classical approach to the classical repertory—in dramatic motivation. She tries to uncover the intellectual and emotional reason for every role, even trivial and non-dramatic ones. In practice, some people find this extraordinary, others find it peculiar. Reports from her post-reformation performances with the Royal Ballet in the past year are conflicting. Several years ago I started avoiding Kirkland's performances because they were too precarious to watch—sometimes she'd be astonishing, sometimes you'd fear for her safety, always her technique was uneven. She affected me most as a teen-aged phenomenon in the New York City Ballet, before she started getting fancy ideas about interpretation, but I'd like to see her now if I had a chance. It's hard to imagine an American company that would risk staging her comeback, though. I've heard rumors Kirkland may put together a touring group of her own.

Kirkland's tragedy isn't the main issue in this book for me, though I regret her loss as a great American ballerina. Kirkland's journey through ballet land is a bum trip, but her story is a kind of Pilgrim's Progress where each stopping-place has a cautionary message. To begin with, there's the equation of ballet itself, a lifetime mentor-pupil relationship requiring initiation before a child is old enough to make any serious decisions. Like Kirkland's description of cocaine addiction, the little twinkle-toes is hooked before she knows what she's into. I suspect it takes a certain kind of personality to submit to the discipline of ballet training, and youngsters who are more independent, more searching, more well-rounded, leave the hermetic surroundings of the studio before they're seriously ensnared.

But there are children, girls and occasionally boys, who are attracted to the regimen. They need the discipline, the authority, they need standards and measuring up. In this country the School of American Ballet is the closest thing to the old, monastic ballet

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schools of Europe, like the Kirov in Leningrad, where George Balanchine and Mikhail Baryshnikov began, and the Royal Theater in Copenhagen, alma mater of Balanchine's heir at the New York City Ballet, Peter Martins. In various ways these men carry on the tradition not only of technical training but of master and pupil, company director and dancer, father and child that is the hierarchical basis of all working relationships in ballet. The ballet school/studio is like a convent: sexless, submissive and dedicated, the dancer remains a novice even when she becomes a performer in her own right. The body is supposed to behave as directed, to have no will or feelings of its own. It must never indulge in sensual pleasures that will interfere with its functioning as an ideal instrument.

George Balanchine insisted on this relationship in his school and company. His adversaries have always seen his dancers as inexpressive, robots; he himself claimed that he just wanted them to do the steps, nothing more. Rebel dancers feel this constricts them and prevents their personalities from coming through. But if that's so, how can we account for some of Balanchine's favorite dancers, like the highly individualistic Suzanne Farrell? I think Balanchine liked to be enigmatic. I think he was in some ways alienated from his dancers, didn't know how to make contact with them, and even staved it off, with epigrams, sarcasm, offhand wisecracks that were remembered as holy writ. I think he did want the dancers to be individual, but he didn't know how to teach the kind of expressiveness he wanted. Some found it instinctively. Others took his pronouncements literally and stifled.

Gelsey Kirkland violated just about every part of the arrangement. Being a heavy ego herself, she rebelled against what she took to be Balanchinian objectivity. "As much as he tried, he could not do away with or do without the unique aspects of individual virtuosity," she says. Kirkland's way of subverting what she couldn't accept was to look for dramatic motivation in Balanchine's steps. She says now she believes he wasn't truly classical. By some definition of her own, Kirkland places ballet classicism in Russia in the last part of the nineteenth century, and connects it to the naturalistic reforms of the eighteenth-century ballet-master Jean Georges Noverre. Balanchine, she says, not only did away with classicism's stories and character, he distorted the line, speed, and rhythm of the steps to create his own neo-classical style.

Kirkland misunderstands classicism, I think, in trying to fix it in one place or period. Historically, the arts don't work that way, they have to keep evolving and responding to their time. Dance mutates much more rapidly than other arts, and even if we knew what nineteenth-century classicism was, no one today could really reproduce it. I think Kirkland is attempting to justify her physical problems with Balanchine's training, which apparently was inimical to her body, by accusing him of being cruel, exploitative, manipulative,

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and unclassical. She does mention other teachers, Stanley Williams, Maggie Black, and David Howard in particular, to whom she went at successive stages in her performing career for corrective work, but she doesn't offer any real prescriptions or approaches to a more healthy overall training.

When she encounters Mikhail Baryshnikov, who is a more recent product of, and apparently a believer in, just the kind of classicism Kirkland longs for, their partnership is a disaster. According to Kirkland, it was flawed from the beginning; what viewers took for idyllic complementarity she now informs us was hero worship and sexual subservience on her part. Although she adored his dancing and felt he was the only possible partner for her, he couldn't teach her anything. She pictures him as some sort of intuitive genius who knew what to do himself and dodged the psycho-dramatic questions that obsessed her. Writing all his dialogue in a crude pidgin-English, she makes Baryshnikov seem not only unintelligent but insensitive and maybe not even the greatest dancer of our time.

She attacks him with adolescent criticisms and shrewish questions in rehearsals when others are present, then can't understand why he's annoyed with her. At one point, for instance, she tries to get him to change the way he lifts her in *Giselle*, so that she will achieve what she thinks is the appropriate line. When he balks, she assumes he "had a complex about his prince looking like a frog." A few sentences later, they try the lift again. Misha fails to cooperate. Evidently complex-free, she bitches: "I had duck feet." Perhaps this kind of challenge and self-importance is the only way arrested personalities can assert themselves. Kirkland, however, thinks she's relating matters of artistic integrity.

Buried under all this ego-play, the question of interpretation is a legitimate one. When dancers learn a ballet, the director or ballet-master teaches the steps, the rhythms, the paths and placements of the movement on the stage. Often, however, next to no information reaches them about the meaning or style of the ballet and how to establish that with their bodies. American Ballet Theater has specialized in the kind of spectacular, narrative ballets considered passé at the New York City Ballet, but the coaching in stylistic matters is just as lax there as in Balanchine's abstract bailiwick. "It was assumed at ABT," says Kirkland, "that a directorial concept emerged automatically from the steps taught by the ballet-master. . . . Nobody ever discussed how the steps were illuminated through character and action."

In the past, when ABT used many more guest stars than it does under Baryshnikov's direction, the big ballets sometimes looked as if everyone in the cast was dancing in a different production. Now, the company is known more for a kind of anonymous stylelessness. The practice Kirkland describes does more than contribute to mediocre performances. It reinforces the infantalization of dancers.

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They aren't supposed to think about what they're doing, but simply to be technical executants of a particular vocabulary. At ABT and many other contemporary companies, you may see precision in timing and placement, but you don't see ensemble in the sense of a communal spirit among the dancers, or an understanding among them about what they're creating together on the stage.

It would be easy in a way to think that Kirkland's discontents are the product of a deranged personality, or that her sexual excesses and drug dependencies are an intelligent misfit's response to a vacuous and valueless profession. But there's too much evidence that physical and mental self-abuse is common in the dance world and long has been. I recently asked an acquaintance about stories I'd heard in the late sixties of mysterious pill-taking and other hanky-panky in the Harkness Ballet. He confirmed the rumors—the dancers were told they were getting special vitamins. But my friend also remembered that in the fifties, dancing in a show, he'd gotten an injection of something that made him feel wonderful; for an hour he thought he was dancing better and having more fun than at any time in his life. Now he thinks he was given amphetamines, and that it was standard practice in shows at the time.

Over and over, Kirkland pushes her career to the edge. She defies the authorities by going to outside teachers, losing weight and strength, missing rehearsals, fighting with her co-workers, and showing up for performances in disastrous condition. Over and over, she's tolerated; when the company heads have to reprimand her, drugs are not mentioned. Whether or not dance companies directly administer drugs—and according to Kirkland, this is sometimes the case—officials certainly are aware of drug and drinking problems in their midst. Yet they cover it up. Perhaps drugs are part of their mystique too. Custodial in every other respect where the training and behavior of dancers is concerned, management looks the other way about the drug problem.

These tales of sin and reform are part of our culture's double message. Officially, drugs are bad for us, not to mention illegal. Scapegoats and pious converts are trotted out and smugly congratulated. But in music and media, fashion and commerce, drugs are constantly, subliminally celebrated. Just this fall, New York theatergoers leafing through their playbill could find a gorgeous Alessandra Ferri, one of Kirkland's successors at Ballet Theater, dressed in chic ballet rags and inviting them to try the Scotch of the "do-er" generation. And Kirkland herself is infinitely better known through this self-flagellating, mean-spirited book than she ever was in her best dancing days. Richer too, of course. The glamourous, ghoulish woman on the *Dance Magazine* cover is the Mata Hari, the Garbo of the 1980s. She's danced herself into and out of the grave, but she's still a leading character in one of our favorite fairy tales.

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MICHAEL GORRA

Fiction Chronicle

THE GERMAN WRITER PATRICK SÜSKIND'S FIRST NOVEL[1] is the sort of book that must be either a great triumph or a great failure, for there can be no middling success with this bestseller blend of historical reconstruction, trash Gothic fantasy, and political allegory. Consider its story: In 1738 Jean-Baptiste Grenouille is born to an oxymoronically unmarried fishwife, a woman "still quite pretty . . . [with] almost all her teeth in her mouth and some hair on her head and—except for gout and syphilis and a touch of consumption . . . no serious disease." She gives birth at her stall in the market—the labor pains begin while she's scaling whiting—and leaves the brat to die in the mess beneath her gutting table, as have her four earlier ones. But this one lives, for his mother gets caught and executed for multiple infanticide, leaving young Grenouille to be passed around the Parisian charities, until he's sold at the age of eight to a tanner.

But there's something even odder about the boy. He doesn't smell. As a baby he lacks not only the milky scent of other babies, but any odor at all. Nor does he begin to reek as he grows older, as every other Parisian does. Not even the tanner's, not even years of not washing, can make him smell like an ordinary human. But in compensation Grenouille is extraordinarily alive to every other scent, to the smells that those other humans don't know exist, the smell of glass or iron, even the odors of emotion. Paris becomes for him an olfactory utopia, filled with an "invisible gruel" of aroma that he never tires of exploring, for he doesn't "differentiate between what is commonly considered a good and a bad smell." But one day he does. He smells the smell of all smells, a blend of "evanescence and substance" that he pursues to its source in a red-haired, green-eyed virgin, who is "so frozen with terror at the sight of him that he had plenty of time to put his hands to her throat." When she's dead he strips her and rapes her with his nose, smelling "her over from head to toe, [gathering] up the last fragments of her scent," and memorizing it.

Grenouille, newly obsessed with the idea of creating such beautiful scents on his own, frees himself from the tannery and gets ap-

[1] PERFUME: THE STORY OF A MURDERER, by *Patrick Süskind*. Translated from the German by *John E. Woods*. Alfred A. Knopf. $16.95.

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prenticed to a perfumer, whose fortune he makes, for his nose is so keen he doesn't even need to measure to create a gorgeous perfume. But most human scents come to appall him. He flees from them to a cave in the Massif Central where, away from people for the first time, he realizes that the one thing in the world he cannot smell is himself, that he lacks the odor that could mark him as human. Afraid of what will happen if he's discovered, he begins to dream of counterfeiting the smell of the human itself and in Grasse, the perfume capital of France, he finds the odor upon which he wishes to base his own, in yet another pubescent red-head. But her scent alone is not enough, it needs to be orchestrated with the scents of others. And so Grenouille begins the series of murders that give the novel its subtitle, killing young girls and then using the perfumer's art—above all *enfleurage à l'huile,* in which he soaks their still-warm bodies in fat—to steal their scents, the scents that will together compose the enthralling perfume through which the fishwife's bastard will persuade the world that he's not a contemptible monster, but the most beautiful man in the world. For in that beauty lies power.

Lurid—yes. And compelling, a page-turner as all the best best-sellers are supposed to be, in which one wants desperately to know what happens next. And also, just possibly, an important work of fiction. Much of that importance is, of course, inseparable from the fun offered by *Perfume*'s slightly antique prose:

> In the period of which we speak, there reigned in the cities a stench barely conceivable to us modern men and women. The streets stank of manure, the courtyards of urine, the stairwells of moldering wood and rat droppings, the kitchens of spoiled cabbage and mutton fat; the unaired parlors stank of stale dust, the bedrooms of greasy sheets, damp featherbeds, and the pungently sweet aroma of chamber pots.

Or the fun of learning how a tanner works, or how perfume is made, or how an apprentice lived in the 1750s. Learning such odd bits of information is, of course, one of the pleasures of reading superior genre fiction, and Süskind presents them so well as to make *Perfume* the intellectual entertainment of the year. (One can almost read the ads: *The Name of the Rose* for 1986. But this novel is even more neatly crafted than Eco's, and far more accessible.) Yet from the first page there's a moral tension in the prose that's absent from those works that remain genre fiction; the analogy I think of is Robert Stone, whose novels one can never, even in their most violent moments, mistake for the work of a thriller writer, however much they offer the same sort of crawling physical excitement. But Süskind dares to wait until the end of the novel to reveal the sources of that moral tension. He waits until Grenouille has made

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his last great perfume to suggest that the novel is a myth about the inner life of a demagogue, and the way in which people respond to him, and later try—out of shame—to forget that they have. It's a mark of Süskind's achievement that one never feels he has simply imposed this theme on the end of the novel. For in retrospect one feels that its presence has been growing throughout the book, but that one has only fully recognized it when Süskind allows Grenouille to recognize it himself.

Phillip Parotti's material begins at the confluence of myth and history, and his first book[2] makes a welcome change from the small domestic dramas upon which its companion volumes in the Illinois Short Fiction series generally rely. *The Greek Generals Talk* is a collection of prose dramatic monologues told, fifty years after the fall of Troy, by the last survivors of Agamemnon's army. Nestor's son Thrasymedes addresses his own grandson, who will rule after him in Pylos. The great admiral Thoas talks to a potter who wants to memorialize him in "a smoothed, finished vase showing forty high-beaked, black-hulled ships scudding like dolphins over the wine-dark seas." And Odysseus' companion Diomedes, the last survivor of the great Achaian generals, offers to take a poet, whose sight is failing, "foot by foot" over the "dusty Plain of Troy . . . the wide, brown stretch of empty land where once, in my youth, I contended with the gods." But what unifies the collection is the way Parotti has integrated such mythic materials with history by imagining Homer's characters facing the Dorian invasion. The old Thessalian Eurypylus helps a young king in Epirus repulse a barbarian foray; Achilles' son Neoptolemus shouts defiance to a barbarian emissary, vowing to wage a total war against them, as he did at Troy when he smashed the skull of Hector's son, even though "the old men berated me for killing" him. Neoptolemus has no use for the cooperation between kings that let the Achaians conquer Troy. And he refuses to learn the lesson which even his father accepted, that taught by Nestor, "the first of us," Diomedes says, "who realized that the days of individual combat were coming to an end . . . [that] we would have to lead by direction rather than individual, physical example . . . to give orders rather than mere exhortations." Dreaming instead of his father's individual glory, Neoptolemus attacks before the Achaians can form an effective alliance, and in Parotti's last monologues the Dorians have begun to overrun Achaia and the stream of refugees has begun.

The collection is not without flaws. One of the monologues, that of Meges of Dulichium, lacks the *sine qua non* of such a performance, in that while its speaker is well defined, the person he addresses is not. And the book comes with an annoying apparatus;

[2] THE GREEK GENERALS TALK, by *Phillip Parotti*. University of Illinois Press. $11.95.

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one welcomes the maps of the Achaian world, but the presence of an explanatory note on the Trojan War, along with a glossary and gazetteer, seems insulting, and perhaps tells me more than I want to know about the audience Parotti or his publisher imagine. But these are quibbles; *The Greek Generals Talk* offers, in the wisdom and sanity of these old men's voices, in their *gravitas* set against the clarity of a world of sun and sea and vine, a reminder of all the reasons why one so values the Homeric world.

Many of the stories in the Trinidadian writer Neil Bissoondath's first collection[3] are also cast as dramatic monologues, often in the voices of those who are for one reason or another exiled from or disenfranchised by their homelands. But his attempts to speak in the voice of a peasant girl living under a Latin American dictatorship in "In the Kingdom of the Golden Dust," or in that of a Japanese girl from a traditional family in "The Cage," ring false to me: Here is the latter story's first paragraph:

> My father is an architect. Architects are good at designing things: stores, houses, apartments, prisons. For my mother, my father, not an unkind man, designed a house. For me, my father, not a kind man, designed a cage.

Too neat, too carefully calculated, this attempt to be Japanese; the writer is too conscious of trying this particular voice on to see how it feels. But sometimes one's new clothes don't fit, and I don't believe in this voice any more than I'd believe in Cary Grant in overalls.

But what an anxiety of influence Bissoondath must work under! He is the nephew of V.S. Naipaul, and so often in reading these stories, one is aware, too aware, of the uncle's work, whose prose Bissoondath's echoes:

> At first it had seemed like a joke: simple people—simplicity then viewed as a virtue, when they were truly simple, playing at the world until the wider corruption inexorably attracted them—eager to be duped by a greater sophistication. Yet Vernon had always felt that more than a simplicity had been involved, more than an island naivety.

This passage from "Veins Visible" feels like a footnote to the uncle's work, to *The Mimic Men* in particular, an exploration of territory he has already fully mapped, and which Bissoondath has not yet been able to make fully his own. Like most of the stories in the volume, it is neatly crafted, but I feel I've read it before, and not as I've read the latest *New Yorker* story before. For Bissoondath writes in that window of time in which such an attitude toward history and to-

[3] DIGGING UP THE MOUNTAINS, by *Neil Bissoondath*. Viking. $15.95.

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ward the psychic region of exile that history creates is still the property of an individual writer, and not of the house of fiction as a whole. And I suspect he's tried to compensate for that by attempting to extend that sense, in stories like "The Cage," to situations that are quite different, perhaps too different, from his own.

Maybe this is unfair. Perhaps if the book came without a biographical note I wouldn't think these stories so derivative; perhaps, too, a summer-long saturation in Naipaul of my own has made me too conscious of any such echoes. Bissoondath works best in charting the lives of Trinidadians now living in Canada, as he does himself, writing about those who've traded the warmth of the islands, in every sense, for an economic opportunity whose cost in dislocation seems increasingly not worth paying; one such story, "Dancing," told in the voice of a black Trinidadian housemaid newly come to Toronto, is far and away the most successful of the collection's dramatic monologues. And yet in one piece with the grandiose title "Man as Plaything, Life as Mockery," Bissoondath does succeed not only in making his uncle's sense of placelessness his own, but in providing the sort of generalized statement about modern history that Naipaul only reached with *In a Free State*, after a decade and a half of work. In it a doctor of unspecified—one suspects East Asian—origin waits in a North American airport for the wife he left behind twenty years ago, and in remembering how he and his infant daughter had escaped the revolution that had caught his wife, comes to see his family in the terms the title suggests. The highest praise I know for this story is that it justifies that title, and makes one think that Bissoondath might, in the end, create a world of his own to write about.

Alice Munro has long since had that world—by which I don't simply mean that she sets most of her stories in the flat Ontario countryside, all wheat fields and small towns, around Lake Huron.[4] Some of her stories seem, in fact, as if they could be set anywhere, or in any small town, for all that the specific region seems to matter—they don't seem to be about living in that part of Canada in the way, say, that Cheever's stories are about Westchester. I've rarely read a group of stories that concentrate so exclusively on their characters' private lives, to the exclusion of the society that contains them. Munro's stories seem to lack a public dimension—but perhaps that's just my own parochial ignorance of what life in Ontario is like. Because in standing back from these stories one does see that Munro's tightness of focus, her absorption in her characters' private lives, is itself a comment, like that implicit in Katherine Mansfield's stories about New Zealand, on the isolation of the region about which she writes. And that isolation in turn makes it possible for Munro to concentrate so tightly on her characters

[4] THE PROGRESS OF LOVE, by *Alice Munro*. Alfred A. Knopf. $16.95.

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themselves, so that they stand out against their background like trees against a wheat field.

But that's not finally what I mean about Munro's possession of a distinctive world. What is most characteristic about her work is not her settings, or even the rather ordinary lives of her rather ordinary characters—farmers, shopkeepers, bright girls from small towns who want to get out—but the way she organizes and presents such materials. Munro's stories are never simple uninflected slices of incomprehensible life. Instead they concentrate on a character's memory of the moment at which something crucial was decided, at which she became the person she was going to be—but a moment whose importance she may not have realized until the story's present. Or perhaps, as in "Jesse and Meribeth," not the person she was going to be, but the one she's always been. That story ends like this:

> I felt such changes then—from fifteen to seventeen, from seventeen to nineteen—that it didn't occur to me how much I had been myself all along. I saw Marybeth shut, with her treats and her typewriter, growing sweeter and fatter, and the Crydermans fixed, far away, in their everlasting negotiations, but myself shedding dreams and lies and vows and errors, unaccountable. I didn't see that I was the same one, embracing, repudiating. I thought I could turn myself inside out, over and over again, and tumble through the world scot free.

That last line has a bold simplicity of the sort that every writer wants to be able to end a story with, but that few are brave enough to try; it's almost as fine as Frank O'Connor's "And anything that happened to me afterwards, I never felt the same about again," at the end of "Guests of the Nation."

My favorite of the collection's eleven pieces, though, is "The Moon in the Orange Street Skating Rink." There a rich widower, a banker named Sam, revisits the small Ontario town where he went to business college and sees, for the first time in half a century, his cousin Edgar, with whom he originally came off the family farm, and Edgar's wife Callie, who'd been the "slavey" at the boarding house where they'd lived. Edgar had seduced Callie—and then married her, even though she didn't get pregnant, without seeming to have been much in love. But why? Sam has wondered about that all his life, a question that's really a way of marvelling at people, at their differences, at his first realization that he and Edgar, who have grown up together, might want different things. And as he marvels at the mystery of other people, so does the reader, in story after story, stories so successful at collapsing a whole life into a few pages as to make me feel that most writers who think they need a

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novel to explore a few characters' personal relations are simply wasting space.

But Ann Arensberg's second novel makes me qualify that: comedy requires length.[5] *Group Sex* isn't as lurid as it sounds; in fact this farce has only one moment at which it threatens to offer the pleasures its title evokes. In the late 1960s Frances Girard and her lover Paul Treat, a director in the avant garde theater, visit Toby Foster, the Boston editor of the publishing house for which Frances works, and his wife Pom. Group sex is in the air, on the news; the Fosters allow as how they've tried it, and well . . . But Paul thinks they're faking it, and spends the evening baiting them by claiming that his "community of actors is a group marriage in all but sexual practice. And many of us feel we are almost ready for that ratification." But when later that night "two pale, bare figures [glide] into the room" Paul and Frances share, "misty, doleful figures, holding hands at the foot of the bed," nobody acts in character and Paul's response to " 'those scabby little perverts' " is uproarious.

Group Sex tells a familiar story—girl meets boy, girl loses boy, girl regains boy, all the while growing in strength and confidence, moving from what Frances calls her "Worm Life" to the "Love Life" with which the novel ends. It's crucial to Arensberg's conception of Frances' and Paul's relation that she sets her novel in the past, for she relies upon their having a relatively traditional notion of the relation between man and woman, and particularly between artist and artist's wife. Frances sees herself as a handmaiden to Paul's genius in a way that a writer couldn't present as uncritically as Arensberg does in a novel set today. Yet this distancing gives the book an odd urbane nostalgia, like that of W.M. Spackman's too-little-known and similarly retrospective 1978 novel *An Armful of Warm Girl*, that makes New York appear safe and solid and undisturbed by the problems we know it has. *Group Sex* isn't a major production, but with lines like "Edie had married Hilliard P. Childs when she was only twenty, to avoid the unthinkable prospect of sitting out life," it does offer a deftly-wrought and high-spirited entertainment.

Group Sex is a sex comedy in which very little sex is actually described. So too is Anthony Powell's *The Fisher King*.[6] Powell has always supposed that such private transactions are so complex as to be incommunicable; what can be communicated, what he has communicated in the fifty-five years since he published *Afternoon Men*, is our endless and insatiable delight in talking about those private affairs, and particularly about those of other people. If in *A Dance to the Music of Time* Powell established himself as the great novelist of the patterns woven by coincidence, then one of the ways in which

[5] GROUP SEX: A ROMANTIC COMEDY, by *Ann Arensberg*. Alfred A. Knopf. $15.95.

[6] THE FISHER KING, by *Anthony Powell*. W.W. Norton. $15.95.

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he established and embellished those patterns was through gossip. His characters speculate endlessly, and to me magnificently, about the couplings and recouplings of those around them; speculations made even more fascinating because, as Powell writes toward the very end of the *Dance*, "finality is never certain, a dimension always possible to add." *The Fisher King* depends even more heavily upon gossip. On a pleasure cruise around the British Isles, two prosperous, middle-aged English couples consider the life of one of their fellow passengers, Saul Henchman, a great photographer whose celebrity has been abetted by his long-ago crippling in World War II—and his consequent alleged impotence. And Henchman's companion only adds to his celebrity, for she is the beautiful young dancer Barberina Rookwood, who's given up her own career to work as his assistant. But why? Why waste herself on a man who can't even sleep with her? Why give up dancing for the sake of Henchman's art? Why—above all—put up with Henchman's extraordinary stream of pornographic anecdotes? So Powell's characters muse throughout the novel, waiting for the rupture they all expect between Henchman and Barberina to happen—waiting made even more piquant by their identification of Henchman with the legendary Fisher King, the maimed ruler in whose keeping the Holy Grail has been placed, and whose potency the right suppliant can restore.

Early in the novel Powell describes the way that the chief gossip, Valentine Beals, "would afterwards recall—even to the extent of tedium for listeners not over-curious as to the workings of human nature and the emotion of love—the drama of the *Alecto*'s cruise." Some readers, one has to admit, have always found his own narratives liable to the threat he assigns to Beals's. I doubt that this volume will win Powell many new devotees (though it is a considerably more substantial book than his 1984 novella, *O, How the Wheel Becomes It!*), for it is Powell purified, stripped of the social history that helped make the *Dance* so rich, too heavily dependent upon his Aubreyesque delight in speculations about human oddity for those who haven't already formed a taste for him to approach. But Powell's gift for creating that human oddity hasn't left him, and two of this novel's figures are as memorable as any in the *Dance* itself. Saul Henchman is perhaps the best of Powell's egotistical artists, a great photographer (part of the novel's achievement is to make one believe that) in whom the desire to get his own way, to impose himself upon others, is inseparable from and indeed essential to his art. Powell's other memorable character is the barfly Mr. Jack, an elderly remittance man whose memory of an earlier encounter with Henchman intrigued me. Just after the war Mr. Jack had brought his beloved Theda, a prostitute, to the disreputable studio where Henchman was supporting himself by pornography while trying to make a critical reputation with his other work. "Arriving pillion

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with the Loathly Damsel and her scourge would have been less unexpected than you, had the mule been able to manage the stairs," Henchman recalls. "I thought you'd want to record some special humiliation, or hitherto unachieved position. Anything but a straight photograph." "Call it sentimental, if you like," Mr. Jack says—but adds that "Trouble about falling in love with a tart is, if you're seen about with her too much, you're liable to be pinched by the coppers for being a ponce. Never knew that before I met Theda . . ." With such characters *The Fisher King* fully justifies itself as a *jeu d'esprit* not of old, but of any age.

While Powell and Arensberg write about the comedy that grows out of their characters' fascination with sex, David Leavitt often writes about the sexual act itself—though the singular form of that noun doesn't embrace the variety of embracing that goes on in his first novel:[7]

> Eliot pulled and pushed in and out of his mouth, which was a signal to reach up under his shirt and pinch his nipples. He let out a low heave, and without warning thick, salty liquid squirted into Philip's mouth—a slight disappointment, as he hoped for violent spewing, hosing the back of his throat. Eliot breathed deeply, his mouth open, and his hands embraced Philip's head.
>
> Respectfully, in spite of health warnings, Philip did what with other men he had never done: he swallowed.

The first paragraph is merely repulsive, though no more so than any similarly clinical account of a heterosexual coupling; if this is what the description of sexual experience must be then I understand Powell's preferring to describe the way people talk around it. It's that second paragraph, though, that really takes me aback. Are we supposed to be moved by the risk that Philip's love for Eliot makes him take? Leavitt's "respectfully," and the colon before the last clause certainly suggest something like a drumroll of emotion. But no emotion can compensate for the stupidity of Philip's action, and any prose that sanctifies that stupidity is so sentimental that it moves me only to laughter.

The Lost Language of Cranes describes the relations between the various members of the Benjamin family: the young editor Philip, who as the novel opens wonders how to come out to his parents; his mother, Rose, a copy editor; and his father Owen, an administrator at a private boys' school in Manhattan, who for twenty years has led a Sunday afternoon secret life at a gay porno theater in the East Village. It ought to be rich material, rich enough, at any rate, to enable Leavitt to move beyond an absorption with his characters'

[7] THE LOST LANGUAGE OF CRANES, by *David Leavitt*. Alfred A. Knopf. $17.95.

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private lives to explore the relation of those lives to the larger polity, or to the minority of which characters like Philip and Owen are a part. Certainly that line about "health warnings" suggests one possible avenue for such an exploration, and the title suggests another. It comes from the never-to-be finished dissertation of one of Leavitt's other characters, a black lesbian named Jerene. She studies private languages, often those developed by children, and the way in which those languages are broken and lost, and what's lost with them, when the time comes for those children to be integrated with their society. But the metaphor seems not only pretentious but largely inapplicable, since Philip in particular has few problems in assimilating himself to the middle class from which he comes.

In any case Leavitt himself is too fully assimilated to the conventions of contemporary magazine fiction, in which brand names replace history, to try to extend his fascination with his characters' private lives to a fascination with the society from which they come. He fails to give his characters the now-unfashionable historical significance, as representative figures of their time, that the traditional realism with which he works nevertheless demands, and which even his title suggests. And in consequence *The Lost Language of Cranes* seems itself like Jerene's lover Laura, who announces that she's "terribly self-involved, just Miss Self-Centered . . . blathering on about myself." Leavitt should learn the formal lessons Alice Munro offers because, frankly, much of the novel is as boring as Laura's conversation, and therefore seems much longer than its 319 pages. Philip goes to a party, hoping to meet someone; then he goes to another party. And so on, for page after maudlin page. Leavitt is much better on the father, whose problems remain problems, even or particularly after Rose discovers his homosexuality. But Owen is largely a sideshow in the novel's concern with his son, and since Philip is never in danger of being disowned by his parents, as Jerene was, his situation remains essentially unproblematic, just one more example of what Gilbert Sorrentino has called the happy people with happy problems so characteristic of contemporary American fiction.

Leavitt's novel depressed me because his first book, the 1984 collection *Family Dancing*, made him one of the most praised fiction writers of my own generation, a generation whose present-tense aesthetic (even when the story is, like *The Lost Language of Cranes*, technically written in the simple past) I find entirely unsympathetic. Reading Louise Erdrich's two novels, 1984's *Love Medicine*, and her new book, *The Beet Queen*, made me feel a lot better about what that generation might produce.[8] (She's a few years older than I am, as Leavitt is a few younger.) The two volumes share the same narrative structure: a cycle of interlocking stories set, at various times over the last half century, in and around the town of Argus, North

[8] THE BEET QUEEN, by *Louise Erdrich*. Henry Holt. $16.95.

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Dakota; most of them told in the voice of one or another of her characters, who are often of Chippewa or mixed Chippewa and European stock, as Erdrich is herself. Both the regionalism and the reliance upon dramatic monologues remind one of Faulkner. So, more importantly, do some of the cadences of her prose, such as her description in *The Beet Queen* of Karl Adare's first sexual encounter with another man, in which his "body tightened unbearably and then let loose, abruptly, in a long dark pulse," an account whose synaesthesia successfully objectifies the combination of emotion and physical sensation that comprise sexual experience: Leavitt should learn from this.

Erdrich isn't the formal innovator that Faulkner was; rather she uses some Faulknerian techniques, albeit purged of their radicalism, in pursuit of one Faulknerian end, the representation of a place and a people whom literature has not paid much attention to before. *The Beet Queen* is a more unified yet also smaller and less ambitious work than *Love Medicine*, but it's rewarding nevertheless. Erdrich begins in 1932 when Adelaide Adare, a "kept woman" of the old school, finds herself left with three children by her lover's bankruptcy and suicide. She plans to take the children to her sister, who runs a butcher shop in Argus—but can't bear the thought that her own adventures are over, and so, one day goes up in a stunt plane at a carnival and simply persuades the pilot to fly off with her. How the children come to Argus; how one winter day Adelaide's daughter Mary smashes her face into the ice at parochial school and sees the face of Christ in the pattern the blow creates; how Mary runs the butcher shop, after her aunt and uncle move to Arizona, along with her friend Celestine James, one of the Kashpaw clan whose lives Erdrich described in *Love Medicine*; how Karl runs away and becomes a travelling salesman and comes back and gets Celestine pregnant and goes away again; and how their daughter Dot grows up to become the Queen of the Argus Sugar Beet Festival—such are the events Erdrich describes, through her characters' clearly differentiated and intriguing voices. Here is Karl in 1972, realizing that:

> Most men get to my age and suddenly they're dissatisfied with all that they've accumulated and left behind. Not me. I wanted everything I'd left behind . . . the cars repossessed after fifteen payments, the customers' houses into which I never got past the doormat, the ones I did get past, their rooms and rich smells of wax and burned food. I wanted the food itself, burned or not, and the women who had left it in the oven too long. I wanted their husbands . . . I wanted the whole world of people who belonged to each other and owned things and cooked food and remembered old songs.

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Such a litany of desire manages to turn a charlatan salesman into something like an American folk hero, rather like the Chippewa escape artist Gerry Nanapush in *Love Medicine*. But the Chippewa themselves, Celestine and her half-brother Russell Kashpaw aside, are largely absent from this novel, in which Erdrich concentrates on Argus, with its population descended from German immigrants. And one misses the Chippewa in this novel, misses the sense of a world being created that *Love Medicine*'s examination of life on the reservation afforded. Erdrich offers that richness here only in dealing with Russell, who after winning a batch of medals in World War II takes "a good bank-clerk job Argus National had offered him as a returning home-town hero, even though he was an Indian." It's in exploring the implications of that "even though" that Erdrich has so far done her best work. But *The Beet Queen* does provide one thing its predecessor lacks, a mischievous taste for slapstick that Erdrich shows, for example, in a scene where Celestine recalls the way a first-grader asked Dot to help her get a loose tooth out—and Dot used a rock to do it.

Erdrich's prose is precise and transparent, a medium through which she reveals her characters, whether she writes in her own voice or in theirs. The British writer Angela Carter's prose calls more attention to itself. Which is appropriate, since her new collection[9] is not a group of stories in the sense that Munro's or Bissoondath's are—"fictions" comes closer, but even that doesn't capture Carter's odd and entrancing use of modernist fictional techniques on materials that conventionally belong more to the essay or to history. They are—simply? no, not simply—prose, and of all the books I've considered here *Saints and Strangers* is the most suggestive of the possibilities of an English sentence, of where the writer's material can lie. In "The Fall River Axe Murders," for example, Carter considers all the events and circumstances, insofar as they can be known, that led up to the hot summer moment at which Lizzie Borden began those forty whacks:

> On this burning morning when, after breakfast and the performance of a few household duties, Lizzie Borden will murder her parents, she will, on rising, don a simple cotton frock that, if worn by itself, might be right for the weather. But, underneath, has gone a long, starched cotton petticoat; another starched cotton petticoat, a short one; long drawers; woolen stockings; a chemise; and a whalebone corset that takes her viscera in an unkind hand and squeezes them very tightly.

Carter's prose is flat and cold; the only emotions it knows are those

[9] SAINTS AND STRANGERS, by *Angela Carter*. Viking. $13.95.

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of the irony with which she describes the "unkind hand" that squeezes Lizzie's—I almost wrote "guts," but what a difference it makes that they're not. And such an absence of emotion is right for this story. For what Carter most requires is the precise objectivity with which she notes the claustrophobic details of the Bordens' life in Fall River, their custom of "locking all the doors, inside and outside," so that their house is "full of locked doors that open only into other rooms with other locked doors"; a precision that makes one imagine the necessity of Lizzie's action without excusing it.

"Our Lady of the Massacre" provides a convincing dramatic monologue in the voice of a prostitute transported as a convict to seventeenth-century Virginia, where she lives with an Indian tribe. Another piece reminded me of Süskind's *Perfume*, in describing the life of Baudelaire's "Black Venus," his West Indian mistress Jeanne, who when she drinks breaks "out in a horrible hag's laughter, as if she were already the hag she would become enjoying a grim joke at the expense of the pretty, secretly festering thing she still was." The life of Edgar Allan Poe; a legend told in Samarkand of the wife of Tamburlaine—Carter seems able to create a narrative out of anything. For me the most memorable piece in the book finds its material in literature itself. "Overture and Incidental Music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" takes off from that sweet and lovely changeling, "stolen from an Indian king," whom Oberon and Titania both want and upon whom Shakespeare premises the rivalry between them. Why do they both want the child? Let "him" speak for himself:

> I am Herm, short for *hermaphrodite verus*, one testis, one ovary, half of each but all complete and more, much more, than the sum of my parts. This elegantly retractable appendage here . . . is *not* the tribade's well-developed clit, but the veritable reproductive erectile tissue, while the velvet-lipped and deliciously closable aperture below it is, I assure you, a viable avenue of the other gender. So there.
>
> Take a look. I'm not shy. Impressive, huh?

And so they dance around the English wood, which "however marvellous, however metamorphic, cannot, by definition, be trackless"—though Carter does add that the "wood of Shakespeare's time, which did not know itself to be Shakespearian, and therefore felt no need to keep up appearances," was just that. And Puck finds himself fascinated by the Herm's smoothness, so different from his own hairiness, which extends even to "the palms of his hands." But the curtain approaches; Puck and Oberon and the rest must become characters once more and stop their bawdy backstage frolic. Story? Essay? No matter. "Overture and Incidental Music," like *Saints and Strangers* as a whole, offers the excitement of an imagination that paradoxically depends upon the past and yet refuses all conventions.

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JAMES FINN COTTER

Public and Private Poetry

NATIONAL POETS ARE JUST ABOUT EXTINCT AS A SPECIES. Some literary conservationists may regret their passing; most readers will hardly notice. Their existence made the task of the selection committees for the Nobel Prize for Literature easier: find a country, then pick a poet. One of the last of their kind, Jaroslav Seifert of Czechoslovakia, received the award in 1984 in recognition of his contribution to Czech poetry. From his first book of proletarian verse, *Town in Tears*, published in 1921, to his retrospective *To Be a Poet* in 1983, Seifert gave voice to the popular notion of the private poet as a public figure. He handled the role well, and wrote honestly about being such a poet. Judged by the selection from eighteen books of poetry translated by Ewald Osers and edited (with additional translations) by George Gibian,[1] Seifert deserves the recognition the Nobel Prize brought him the year before his death. Like his role of poet, he took the award in stride, in full knowledge that he and his poems represented the past and were not to be repeated. He could still write about the moon, but as "a dead satellite" littered by the ironmongery of "the happy Americans." His memory of seeing Halley's comet as a child peering over the backs of strangers, with the cathedral of Prague against the sky, evokes a vision of "trails of sparks which would not die" even as the comet vanished. As the sensual world calls to the poet, the invisible realm fades from view, remaining nonetheless real. In "Song of the Sweepings," heaven, hell and Eden become a child's game of hopscotch on a pavement where the body of a murdered woman lies. Seifert frequently undercuts his nostalgia for romantic leaps with details of violence or vulgarity. In one breath he idealizes a woman's beauty and in the next refers to an armpit or crotch. At times such self-parody tumbles into banality; by refusing to be profound or noble, Seifert settles for the merely trivial. He is most himself when he describes Prague, a city of old streets, parks, and cemeteries. "Finger Prints" is a typical poem, recalling the moment when, as a youth, the poet embraced the legs of a nude statue, and was doomed to lose his way in love's labyrinth. Unfortunately, he sounds like a boy who has just discovered a girlie centerfold: "When I first saw / the picture of a

[1]THE SELECTED POETRY OF JAROSLAV SEIFERT. Translated from the Czech by *Ewald Osers*; edited and with additional translations by *George Gibian*. Macmillan. $17.95.

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nude woman / I began to believe in miracles." The poem recovers when he turns his gaze to Prague and thanks God "for granting me that magnificent setting to live in." The collection concludes with passages from Seifert's memoirs which are less artfully self-conscious and more revealing than the verse.

In his book of new and selected poems,[2] Robert Phillips shows once again his talent for finding fresh ways to utter old truths of public concern in a personal idiom. "Decks" provides a cheerful parable of suburbia's daily invasion of the city until the day when a flotilla of houses rides into the streets with wives aboard in search for "their captains of industry." The East Hampton dump of "In the Dumps" is a "raw ravine" and "an ungrand canyon" of compacted waste which reminds us that plastic will outlive the planet. Personal poems about the flawed attempts at love between man and woman, father and son, and friends, define without sentimentality or cynicism the troubled rituals of maintaining love. Poems about boyhood—efforts at magic tricks, fear of a father's wrath, or an outing to the beach—capture the American past of harsh puritanism and Depression poverty. Some poems get us inside the body itself where skin becomes clothing or a wet suit:

> Tough, rubbery, resilient,
> it's like zipping myself inside
> a deboned black man's hide.
> It's being Huckleberry Finn
> inside strong Nigger Jim.
> "The Skin Game"

"The Tenant," "The Pregnant Man," "The Invisible Man," and "The Married Man" deliver a metaphysical knockout punch with dark humor and graphic imagery. The only poems that strike a weak note are those on painting and photography; they remain at two removes from reality and, as descriptions of descriptions, lack immediacy. The decision to organize the selections into thematic categories forces some poems to take up with strange bedfellows. Several of my favorites from *Running on Empty* apparently failed to pass muster, although the title poem made it. Phillips writes best when "riding on nothing / but fumes, pushing luck harder" than other poets dare and leaving most of them behind.

The title of Stephen Berg's seventh book of poems, *In It*,[3] puts the reader inside the poet's consciousness to reveal the essentials of his and our existence. This ambitious task is rightly taken up in everyday experiences. In the title poem, we ride with him home from

[2]PERSONAL ACCOUNTS, by *Robert Phillips*. The Ontario Review Press. $16.95; $9.95.

[3]IN IT, by *Stephen Berg*. University of Illinois Press. $8.95p.

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classes in Philadelphia "inside the bubble of the car." The bubble of "being here" is a Heideggerian *dasein* networking everything and nothing:

> I know that flower of emptiness
> when the self touches the world in a deep blur
> and the mind opens and is anything.

Berg loves being there, in the classroom teaching poetry, talking poetry with his colleagues, and writing poetry himself. He seems justified to be so content with himself, his friends, and his job. The result for the reader, however, leads not to euphoria but to a feeling of claustrophobia. Writers of poetry writing about writing and teaching poetry may liberate the self but they hardly enlarge the reader's world. Philadelphia opens its window on occasion to give us a breeze from outside. It may not be Prague, but glimpses of the Walt Whitman Bridge and the Delaware River, of streets and stores seen from a bus, offer a release from too much introspection. "A God" begins: "Alone at night in my room, / typing these words, / baffled by what they will be," and goes on to recall the poet's mother recalling her own life. Even a poem like "And the Scream," which is based on observations of other people, cannot resist asides like: "Nobody would call this poetry," "incomplete sentences, true," and "what I need to say is—." Exactly what a poem does not need to say! Too many poems also smell of the classroom, the poetry discussion group, or the poetry-reading hall. Some poems do represent sincere attempts to grasp at self-acceptance in "being a man" through reflection and pain, but most lack a world in which such discoveries can resonate.

Jerome Mazzaro avoids these solipsistic pitfalls by confining his second collection of poems to personal experiences.[4] The painful breakup of a marriage gives narrative shape to the book, although sometimes the autobiography comes uncomfortably close to eavesdropping. Beside free verse, Mazzaro uses conventional rhymed stanzas that render some emotional passages in too formal a style. The wife's voice in "Vital Signs" sounds too much like Robert Lowell's in *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*, an artificial idiom to begin with. The title poem, "Rubbings," is most effective in re-creating the hard sayings that pass between estranged husband and wife and between distant father and son. "Seal Rocks" sets the scene of a separation in San Francisco with specific locales and personal gestures, and the drama continues with poems set in Hawaii, the lush background strongly counterpointing the inner sense of loss. "Apologies" addresses a young daughter with an appeal for forgiveness, recalling a past summer of relaxation in contrast to a winter of financial and

[4]RUBBINGS, by *Jerome Mazzaro*. Quiet Hills Press. $5.95p.

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emotional discontent. The parent appeals to the child to be more human than he has been; here honesty reaches out to a universal context. Poems on cities also seem to work out well. "Buffalo/Stasis" warmly presents an image of snowbound citizens reasserting life on their own terms:

> Outside are hearty welcomes, handshakes,
> bought drinks, and, soon to be seen,
> green grass blades eating at the snow.

"Driving South" captures the changing landscape with a list of cities and ends with a menu of gulf shrimp and catfish. The authentic observations clash, however, with a forced allusion to D. H. Lawrence's "Rocking-Horse Winner" which belongs more in the study. Two poems on Toronto, at the beginning and end, round out the private world in a public framework that marks the changes in the poet's life.

In the title poem of her fifth collection, "The Ghosts of Who We Were,"[5] Phyllis H. Thompson imagines a wintry railroad yard where past lovers meet, hold ghostly hands for a moment, and watch the train leave without them. With such pictures, the poet fashions landscapes into myths of her life's journey. "Home" traces the stations backward, from Hawaii to Jamestown and Erie. Weather and season localize events in one's life; rain, snow, surf, sand and grass appear as backdrops of childhood and personal history. "What We Learned" begins:

> We have a history now,
> Rich with account and act,
> As long as a Congress or a war,
> As worn with poverty and hope as any nation,
> Or as our lives before we met.

Here the private poet reinvents the public poet's role, using it to her own purpose with wit and precision. At times, the role takes over and fails to convince, as in "Chartres" where the pilgrim's plea for forgiveness and revived faith sounds more rhetorical than real. Too often sentence fragments, employed to create tension, read instead like headlines or news bulletins. Absence of verbs becomes an affectation, and strung-out descriptions, meant to bear the whole weight of meaning, collapse under the burden. The poet does handle rhyme with great skill. The dramatic monologue, "At Ninety-Two," follows a strict schema that perfectly mimics the elderly woman's dignified voice reminiscing about love and death. Some lines

[5]THE GHOSTS OF WHO WE WERE, by *Phyllis H. Thompson*. University of Illinois Press. $8.95p.

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slip into the telegraphic style, however, like sudden static: "Light washes. Nothing. Null. The deep. / The years that empty into sleep." The note does not ring true.

David Ignatow's new and collected poetry[6] picks up where *Poems: 1934-1969* left off, with the public iconoclasm and private sadness that mark the previous work. The prose and prosiness deliberately deflate the role of poet as spokesman and representative of the rest of humanity. The absence of imagery, figures of speech, or rhythmic diction is meant to express the author's loss of faith in the old methods and forms. Of course, the revolution has by now itself become a commonplace, and Ignatow sometimes appears to parody the whole process. He is convincing when struggling to face his own pessimism, failures, and fear of death. "There's a hole in the earth I'm afraid of," he admits with typical matter-of-factness in "Going Down," but he lowers himself into it to explore its depths. "In This Dream" pictures a vacuum cleaner sucking brain, heart, bones and blood into its emptiness, a nightmare worthy of Kafka. Only on occasion does the poet allow himself a chance to exalt, in "I live admiring the sky," for example. These heights and valleys make the poetry worth reading in spite of its desert emptiness and narcissistic glare. In "This False Desire," Ignatow rejects nature as a vehicle for the poet: "The leaves wave in the wind to urge me to falsehood, to make myself a chanter of life, a bard who calls on others to live for the glory of living. I'm tempted but I refuse." He finds nothingness more fascinating and would like to become nothing. He often presents himself as a zero in his role of husband, lover, father. So many disappointments add up to a much of a muchness, relieved only by the author's surprising humor and self-mocking honesty. Poems about the poet's chair, his hot-water bottle, his battle with cockroaches and struggle with a mugger remain in the mind long after the existential probings have faded. Ignatow, who likes to pose as a patient man waiting for a sign from God, plays a modern Job with less success. He is most engaging when wrapped up not in himself but the world around him: "With Horace I take my stand beside the rocks / and clear falls." There he stands on firmer ground.

In his new and selected poems,[7] R. S. Thomas, like his Celtic predecessor W. B. Yeats, looks back on time to cast a cold eye on life, on death. The Welsh minister finds little comfort in sectarian Christianity and even less in our current industrialized society. Art, in the Impressionist painters, a parishioner's piano-playing, and one's own poetry, embodies a search for meaning in ways religion often fails to achieve. In his one-act play, *The Minister*, Thomas has the narra-

[6]NEW AND COLLECTED POEMS, 1970–1985, by *David Ignatow*. Wesleyan University Press. $30.00; $12.95.

[7]POEMS OF R. S. THOMAS. University of Arkansas Press. $19.95.

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tor call Protestantism "the adroit castrator / Of art" and "the bitter negation / Of song and dance and the heart's innocent joy." Ironically, "In Church" asks: "Is this where God hides / From my searching?" The darkness inside the church, in shadows cast by "an untenanted cross," represent the dark night of the modern soul. God no longer or so readily reveals himself in nature as to poets of the past: "He is such a fast / God," Thomas observes in "Pilgrimages," "always before us and / leaving as we arrive." He wonders:

> Was the pilgrimage
> I made to come to my own
> self, to learn that in times
> like these and for one like me
> God will never be plain and
> out there, but dark rather and
> inexplicable, as though he were in here?

In these poems, the pilgrim waits in silence, "somewhere between faith and doubt." Just as a poem emerges from morphemes and phonemes and the sculpture comes from the stone, so in everyday life "it is the plain facts and natural happenings / that conceal God and reveal him to us / little by little under the mind's tooling" ("Emerging"). The mind's tooling is too often in evidence in these lines, however, and the homiletic tone at times becomes overbearing. Even the flowers, bright spots on this bleak poetic landscape, wilt in the didactic atmosphere. Although Thomas always offers himself as a forthright and humble witness in his quest for meaningfulness, his presence grows impersonal and stony, like the hills he treads in loneliness and cold. Here the public voice sounds a sour note, while the private voice hesitates to affirm anything more than a hint of what it might discover. "Suddenly" is one of the rare poems that throw off their inhibitions and sing "in the vernacular / of the purposes of One who is."

Philip Booth's new and selected poems[8] cover a period of thirty-five years that reveal a consistently open-eyed and -hearted attitude to the world he has lived in and the people he has known. The coast of Maine and the inland hills and farms of New England form the authentic background material for poems from "Shag" and "Vermont: Indian Summer" to "The Garden: Penobscot Bay" and "North Haven." Wife and daughter appear in the early poems "Adam" and "First Lesson" and emerge again in later poems. The title poem "Relations" presents a rural postmistress beginning her work in early morning as a symbol of all worker-lovers and word-givers who bring us a sense of belonging to one another and the

[8]RELATIONS: SELECTED POEMS 1950–1985, by *Philip Booth*. Viking/Penguin. $25.00; $12.95.

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land. In the course of years, Booth speaks with growing clarity about the critical choices facing humanity; we are either makers or breakers of our nature: "to find some word for / how we bear our lives" and "to relate ourselves, / over and over" ("Saying It"). In this public stance he has remained the same poet, the follower of Thoreau in "Letter from a Distant Land" and the Odyssean seeker of "Before Sleep." Sometimes, as in "The Tower," the symbolism is too overt, the language too plain, and the personal involvement too slight; some poems, like "Gathering Greens," read more like notes for poems in their sketchiness. Most of the new poems, however, open to a further range of private vision and social consciousness. "Snapshot" offers an ironic self-portrait of accumulative autobiography, while "Fire on the Island" provides fresh symbolic setting for the gap between community and environment. "Creatures," set at the Cloisters, frames in a photograph a moment of epiphany as tourists attempt to describe "a sky beyond / belief." Standing before the tapestry of the risen unicorn, the poet wonders at our power to hurt ourselves, "ourselves in this creature, / to hunt him in us." But in return for his wounds, we are greeted with:

> a resurgent joy,
> a joy in the world we walk back into
> no one of us
> must let ourselves destruct.

Booth recapitulates his own search and the quest for the Grail in "Creatures." In other poems about fishermen, farmers, teachers, wealthy and rich, brainy and brawny, great and ordinary, he gives us a sense of our moving together on a deep current with few charts to guide us, but heading always for some sea-change, rich and strange.

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EMILY GROSHOLZ

Marriages and Partings

SINCE GALWAY KINNELL'S TRANSLATION of *Du mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve* in 1968, the poetry of Yves Bonnefoy, widely regarded as the finest poet writing in France today, has not found an appropriate conduit to the American reading public. The recent bilingual edition of his *Poems 1959-1975* with an admirable translation by Richard Pevear[1] provides a welcome opportunity for its reintroduction. This book includes his last two collections of poetry, *Pierre écrite* (1965) and *Dans le leurre du seuil* (1975), as well as a most illuminating critical essay by Jean Starobinski, "Poetry Between Two Worlds," which sets out some of the metaphysics underlying Bonnefoy's poetry, a dialectic of the corporeal-real and the transcendent-imaginary in which "the imaginary, accused of having concealed reality, of having slandered appearances, of having set itself up as a separate world, is finally received as a legitimate part of a vaster, reconciled world."

Bonnefoy's poetry has already inspired a substantial body of secondary literature which tends, like Starobinski's essay, to analyze it in an abstract and philosophical way. Indeed, Bonnefoy was trained as a mathematician and a philosopher; the conceptual complexity of his poetry is undeniable, and the recombination of his formulaic words and phrases has the purity and precision of abstract algebra. Yet, strangely, the critics have been fairly quiet about what will strike most readers first, that Bonnefoy has written some of the greatest love poetry of our era.

Unlike Montale's haunting speeches to absence or Elytis' celebration of the latest Maria Nephele, Bonnefoy's love lyrics are the testimony of a thoughtful and passionate husband to the exalted or sober, calm or troubled experience of living day to day with a spouse and, finally, a child as well. Feminist critics who justly urge that the enduring give-and-take, erotic, social, familial, of marriage be treated as a serious literary theme, should read Bonnefoy closely. The poems of *Pierre écrite* are prothalamia, celebrations in uneasy tension with a darker sense of mortality.

> I knew you sometimes as the earth,
> From your lips I drank the anguish of springs

[1] POEMS 1959-1975, by *Yves Bonnefoy*. Translated by *Richard Pevear*. Vintage Books. $14.95; $7.95.

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As it wells up from sun-warmed stones, and high summer
Looked down on the blessed stone and the drinker.

Sometimes I said you were myrtle and we burned
The tree of all your gestures for a day.
They were the high, brief fires of vestal light,
Thus I invented you amidst your bright hair . . .
"Myrtle"

In *Leurre*, the tonalities are even darker, yet they are matched by a sense of affirmation (indicated formally by an almost liturgical repetition of "oui" and "je consens") and wholeness which has grown stronger with time, and is intensified by the birth of a child.

Yes, by birth
Which made the flame
Out of nothing, and mingles
Our two calmed faces.

(We bent down, and the water
Was flowing quickly,
But our hands, broken there,
Grasped the image.)
"The Scattered, the Indivisible"

This vision of human wholeness, which neither succumbs to the threat of fragmentation nor pretends to a false completeness, is rooted in a countryside as specific and concrete as the relationships which inspire it, the Basses Alpes and the *arrière pays*, the hills behind Nice. Bonnefoy is not a poet of cities, seascapes or exotica, but prefers the southern heartland of France, where mountains and valleys, rivers and fields furnish the great private rooms created by earth's corrugation. Olive and almond trees, poppies and vine shoots, stones and myrtle share this privacy with him along with his wife; thus Bonnefoy's poems have the multivocality of conversation. "You bend down, you pick / A little of the divinity of a dry herb / And in the abundance of its crushed odor / This waiting which is life, this cry of hunger, ends" ("The Clouds").

Peter Sacks, author of *In These Mountains*,[2] was born and grew up in South Africa, but left over a dozen years ago and now teaches at Johns Hopkins. So his first book of poems has a brooding political dimension, and the sadness of exile. A poem entitled "For Richard Turner" contains two direct quotations from one of his old teachers, assassinated in Durban in 1978. "At least stick to political / philosophy. Remember, / literature's too easy." And, "I know it's diffi-

[2] IN THESE MOUNTAINS, by *Peter Sacks*. Collier Books. $15.95; $10.95.

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cult in this country, / but we've got to think more clearly / than the State allows." What we do is meaningful and how it is meaningful is constituted by the talk with which we project, accompany and review it. When we write about political events, which is also to participate in them by reviving and transforming their significance, we should, as Sacks's teacher points out, strive to be both difficult and clear. Difficult, because no important human problems can be resolved by any simple appeal to univocal principles; clear, because to be effective, a voice must be comprehensible and persuasive.

Sacks tries to live up to these admonitions. In "News from Home," a love letter full of red roses is altered by news of "further killings in South Africa" to become a political portent of events which swamp and confound people in the two by two of family life, requiring a different kind of organization and action.

> The heavy blossoms turn their dark heads
> horizontal to the ground.
> If I could, I'd take them, cut them, shake them
> free for you; if I thought that might
> leave more than just the stems.
> What grows about them gathers round us, too.
> What moves between, what fills, what cannot hold,
> however heavily it clots—is flowing here.

Sacks adds his testimony to that of Nadine Gordimer, John Coetzee, Dennis Brutus and Athol Fugard, recalling, not in tranquillity, the lovely, rich and impoverished landscape of South Africa and the ghosts that trouble it. The poem "Machadodorp" (a town in the Eastern Transvaal) describes "farmworkers' huts of mud / and corrugated iron, on through / a gate into the sweet tambookie / grass, its reed-like spears / lining the path. The ground is thick / with dew. Around us, open contours / of this cattle and wheat country / play out to each soft / amber range, a low horizon / broken only by a line / of smoke, a stand of blue-gums / in a darkening cleft."

The vivacity and clarity of Sacks's memories electrify his language, raising it from the rather commonplace diction of the earlier poems to the urgent, haunted language of the title poem, "In These Mountains." This poem is an account of the Bushmen who retreated to the deserts and mountains of South Africa during the nineteenth century to escape the incursions of European settlers, and were finally annihilated there. Returning to his native country as a stranger and tourist, Sacks visits a small museum in the mountains to see their cave paintings; the visit precipitates this extended meditation, mythological and historical, whose penultimate image of a Bushman murdered in his cave is followed by Sacks's listening to the silence of the bereft hills.

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> . . . the hills without a sound—no bird cry,
> no river sound, no spirits traveling quickly
> with their quivers under the cold drift of stars,
> their bone-chip rattles and their voices
> streaming in the darkness and the wind.
> "In These Mountains"

Wyatt Prunty's second book, *What Women Know, What Men Believe*,[3] celebrates the birth of his son and mourns the death of his father in a double gesture repeated throughout the book. "A Winter's Tale," the book's first poem, concludes ". . . your birth was my close land / Turned green, the stone rolled back for leaving, / My father dead and you returned." (Bonnefoy translated Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* and prefaces *Pierre écrite* with a quotation from it: "Thou met-test with things dying; I with things newborn." The same sense of bitter loss transfigured by reawakening informs both books.)

Two cognate poems about his son at night develop his double theme. In "Sleep," his ability to comfort his child reminds him of the fear and pain he was powerless to comfort, beside his father's hospital bed. His grief revives when he wakes to soothe ". . . Some nights, my crying child who really cries. / That's easy. Rise, turn on the light and speak; / at least I answer one set of fears. / Worst, my father calling me for help, / his voice loud as the one he used to call / me home for supper, and locked at a distance" ("Sleep"). But he is also reminded, in "Getting My Son to Sleep," that his child is mortal; a well-founded fear lies behind every child's imaginary terror of the dark and consciousness' darkness, sleep.

> Crying because kept up too late
> He can't give in and go to sleep
> But stands up in his crib and tells me
> "No, no, light on," refusing to lie
> Under the covers I turn for him—
> He's learned just how alone he is
> When his eyes close and nothing steadies
> His falling beyond the place he lies.

Prunty's style is characterized by a slight semantic slippage or categorical distortion which doesn't quite qualify as a figure of speech. In his poetic domain, years are wrong and claws practical; the commonplace is needed and respectability enumerated; paths widen, fear tunnels and pulses waltz. This semantic habit is echoed formally by half-rhymes, and half-feet that roughen the metrical regularity

[3] WHAT WOMEN KNOW, WHAT MEN BELIEVE, by *Wyatt Prunty*. Johns Hopkins University Press. $12.95; $6.95.

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of his verse. Sometimes Prunty's calculated imprecision misfires, but more often it succeeds, producing an odd verbal music and vision of the domestic world which are both humanly compelling and wholly idiosyncratic, as here in the poem "Husband."

> Grief is this quiet room we shared,
> Your heavy sleep my comfort even when
> I lay awake because of you
> And waited for the clock to close
> My questioning that as a night light
> Had the outline of our room but not its feel.
> I waited till the birds outside
> Began their widening paths for food
> Then rose to make your breakfast,
> A commonplace ignored yet needed.
>
> Now the house will be too quiet,
> Its rooms more spacious than before,
> Evading my grasp like the shafts
> Of light that skew this waking here alone.
> I miss nothing you could give me
> But your taking what I gave.

Prunty's sympathy extends, not just to his own kin, but here to a bereaved husband, in the chilling "Rooms without Walls" to a victim of child abuse, in "The Vireo" to a hatchling who doesn't make it, to backyard moles, Wallace Stevens and Gypsy Rose Lee. If he is a domestic poet, his household includes the better part of the world.

Rita Dove also understands the long-term intricacies of marriage, as the protagonists of her wonderful chronicle *Thomas and Beulah*[4] testify. In her wise and affectionate portrait of two people whose lives interweave because of marriage, Dove emphasizes their separateness by arranging the book in two halves, Thomas' story (vignettes from about 1920 to his death in 1963) followed by Beulah's in similar sequence. The ordering reveals how differently each perceived their union and the lifelines leading up to and away from it, and doesn't gloss over hostilities and disaffection. For all that, the couple's devotion is clear and each is in the other's final thoughts.

But *Thomas and Beulah* is arresting not only as a study of character, but for the brilliance of Dove's style, which has the same pitch and inventiveness as that of Gjertrud Schnackenberg and Alice Fulton. (Of course, for that very reason their work is otherwise quite dissimilar.) Dove can turn her poetic sights on just about anything

[4] THOMAS AND BEULAH, by *Rita Dove*. Carnegie-Mellon University Press. $14.95; $6.95.

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and make the language shimmer. Here Beulah remembers her husband and his sister, Willemma, in the poem "Pomade."

> She sweeps the kitchen floor of the riverbed her husband saw fit
> to bring home with his catfish, recalling
> a flower—very straight,
> with a spiked collar arching
> under a crown of bright fluffy worms—
> she had gathered in armfuls
> along a still road in Tennessee. Even then
> he was forever off in the woods somewhere in search
> of a magic creek.
>
> It was Willemma shushed the pack of dusty children
> and took her inside the leaning cabin with its little
> window in the door, the cutout magazine cloud taped to the pane
> *so's I'll always have shade.* It was Willemma
> showed her how to rub the petals fine
> and heat them slow in mineral oil
> until the skillet exhaled pears and nuts and rotting fir.

This precise sensuousness of description brings to mind certain passages where Colette describes cooking in her Provençal cottage, basting chicken, for example, with a sprig of thyme dipped in olive oil; or the section in Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* set in the south of France, although there sensuality must be renounced in the service of politics, reduced to a cell whose only ornament is the glow of sunset. Dove's poignant and exacting taste for the things of this world hovers between Colette's intimacies and Gordimer's uncompromising revolt of the imagination against the fact of injustice.

History in *Thomas and Beulah* is subordinated to the demands of biography and lyric, but it is present by innuendo in many of the poems, and explicitly in the chronology supplied at the end of the book. Northward migrations of black workers between the wars, breadlines and hobos during the Depression, strikes and union organizers, the civil rights movement, the March on Washington, "a crow's wing mov(ing) slowly through / the white streets of government," form the background of her story. The history of black politics and the church in this country cannot be disentangled; the poem "Gospel" begins: "*Swing low so I / can step inside*— / a humming ship of voices / big with all / the wrongs done / done them. / No sound this generous / could fail: / ride joy until / it cracks like an egg, / make sorrow / seethe and whisper." The drift of these lives is celebratory; despite plenty of hard times, nothing is ruined and most of the loss is redeemed, expunged and sweetened. "Yet how healthy / the single contralto / settling deeper / into her watery furs! / *Carry me home,* / she cajoles, bearing / down. Candalabras brim . . ."

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("Gospel"). Dove's optical, tactile music makes a present harmony out of the future and the past.

Kathryn Stripling Byer is aligned with an already distinguished group of contemporary North Carolina poets, Robert Watson and Fred Chappell, Robert Morgan and A.R. Ammons, James Applewhite, Gerald Barrax, Shirley Anders and Michael McFee. The poetry of *The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest*[5] springs from the pine barrens and mountains, pig farms and tobacco fields of rural North Carolina, and from generations of women who inhabited them, great-grandmother to infant daughter.

Byer's invocation of these women can be quite mythological. Her grandmother standing at the kitchen sink in the book's final sequence, "I Inherit the Light of My Grandmother's House," becomes Everywoman: "She has been able / to lay up her treasures on earth, / as if heaven were here, worth believing. / In the water her hands reach / like roots grown accustomed to living, / the roots of the catbriar that hold to the hillside / and can never be torn free of this earth completely" (8, "Kitchen Sink"). And her great-grandmother who came from the Black Hills is similarly enlarged and generalized: "You could be anyone's daughter. Who / are you? You stumble into the mesquite / still looking for one perfect skull / with a family resemblance which you will hold / up to the light. Through the holes / that were once her eyes you see the sky come / to meet you, panoramic as history" ("Search Party").

On the other hand, Byer's women appear sometimes in the most homely and concrete fashion. She speaks of herself and her mother united and divided by handwork's insurance against idleness. "Making something out of / almost nothing . . . My mother / did it, and her / mother and her mother's / mother fashioned doilies / out of their white thread / while I looked on. She / said such fingerwork / calmed women's nerves by / making them take pains / to pass the time." ("Daily Witness: 2, Afternoon") Now that she is a mother herself, she wonders what she can tell her daughter. ". . . She wants Snow White awakened, a kiss on both cheeks. I want wind / on my face. We are caught / in a story with no happy ending. Rain / always comes back singing / pretty lies. Where is the sky, / the way out of this house where I hold her / so tightly she cries out against / me, brushing my lips with her eyelashes?" ("Like a Mother Who Never Sleeps, Rain"). The domestic round is both inviting and claustrophobic for Byer; she seeks her reconcilements in poetry, with its long historical and mythic perspectives.

Byer's language is not as distinctive as that of some of the other poets discussed in this chronicle, but an interesting tension enlivens her work, between genteel lady and pioneer woman, the white and

[5] THE GIRL IN THE MIDST OF THE HARVEST, by *Kathryn Stripling Byer*. Texas Tech University Press. $13.95; $6.95.

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red of the Indian wars, the dour German and wild Irish sides of her family, drought and fruitfulness. Peanuts, peaches, potatoes; drought, frost and ashes title her poems. Perhaps to a person raised in the back country of Georgia and North Carolina, such polarities are simply constitutive of reality, "one summer no rain and the next a flood / ripping out every last seedling." In any case, they give Byer's poetry a complexity which repays careful reading.

Irving Feldman's latest book, *All of Us Here*,[6] looks a bit peculiar in this company, since it is not evidently domestic or political, pastoral or biographical. Rather, the title sequence is about works of art (George Segal's urban scenes with plaster casts of people inhabiting them) and the rest of the book displays Feldman's gifts as a master ironist. After the immense earnestness of all the foregoing books (and my own criticism as well), Feldman's anarchic and honest ironies are refreshing, if somewhat unrelenting. And his reflections on art raise important issues.

Feldman consistently writes at a high level of verbal invention and conceptual subtlety. In the following passage, which introduces the eleventh poem in "All of Us Here," he combines the highflown and lowdown with consummate skill in order to exhibit how these statues, like shit, occupy a strange middle ground between the animate and inanimate, person- and thinghood.

> Dust, pallor, drabness of the tomb.
> The air in here
> feels dated, stale, as if some special apparatus
> —spiritual gills, say—were needed to get
> into our lungs what little uncombusted time
> is left, someone's been embezzling it for so long.
> These plasters, perhaps?
> Impossible? Dis-animate,
> they look like coprolites, a species of giant dung
> left whitening on the ground with dignity and age
> —of what unimaginable, departed gods
> the sacred excrement, divine residuum?
> "Dust, Pallor, Drabness"

(The echo of Keats in this context is pretty funny.)

Because the statues were made by a person for people, like any of our artifacts they have insistent meaning, but in an incomplete way. Segal has made their incompleteness all the more ambiguous by fashioning them as plaster casts of real people and setting them next to "real" ladders, brick walls, dentist's chairs. We want them to be breathing individuals in their attractively settled surroundings, and to talk back to us, perhaps to advise us how we can learn to

[6] ALL OF US HERE, by *Irving Feldman*. Viking. $17.95; $8.95.

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settle the fragmented cityscapes they seem so contented in. But instead they are only equivalence classes, like the abstract unities of mathematics; sieves for what we want to remember, like the dead; blank, humanly-formed surfaces to be colored by our desires, like dolls. And they are mute. In the third poem of the series, Feldman observes,

> To be responded to is as close as one
> can come in *this* life to immortality.
> So we come and stand here and look at them
> to make more answering life to answer us . . .
> But no, but no, they are creatures of paste,
> too-large dolls left back in the solitude
> of some local but permanent interim
> —the terminal moraine where time ran out—
> who hope no longer to be born at all.
>
> "Oh, Here and There"

Finally, however, Segal's statues and Feldman's elaborate meditations on them must return us to ourselves, for they are neither here nor there. Only people who say "here" and "now" as they go about their business create habitable locales, even if their deployment of concepts and categories confers on the world its cognitive universality, and the associated lure and threat of timeless order. Feldman's dissatisfaction with the satisfactions possible "here" and "now" leads him to portray "our ordinariness . . . bemonstered by / the savage banalities of caricature." It's hard to choose between this and earnestness. In the end I prefer Bonnefoy's uncertain but warmer appreciation of the strange conditions of this life.

> And we shall be for each other like the flame
> When it leaves the torch,
> A phrase of smoke briefly legible
> Before it vanishes in the sovereign air.
>
> "The Clouds"

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DEAN FLOWER

Nabokov's Private Eye

> Ever since the shot—that shot which, in my opinion, had been fatal—I had observed myself with curiosity instead of sympathy, and my painful past—before the shot—was now foreign to me. . . . In respect to myself I was now an onlooker.

The speaker Vladimir Nabokov impersonates here is a queer, sneaky little closet-romantic named Smurov. He has just shot himself, he claims, and miraculously returned to existence as an invisible observer, a spy "invulnerable" to human concerns, cleansed of his "foul life." At the end of his patently unconvincing monologue (*Soglyadatay*, 1930; translated *The Eye*, 1965) he shrills out, "The world, try as it may, cannot insult me" and "I alone do not exist" and "I am happy—yes, happy!" But the wished-for evasion is merely verbal, a stunt of pronouns: "I" and "Smurov" adhere with damning persistence. Like Humbert who said he "Canceled and cursed" his clearly guilty double in *Lolita*, or Hermann in *Despair* who tried to "die" by murdering his double, Smurov shouts his poor truth but nobody is taken in. He remains a mere mortal, morally grotesque and desperately unhappy. It is a tale told by a neurotic, full of pathos and irony, signifying what?

Let us return to the fatal shot. Readers familiar with the main events of Nabokov's biography will recognize at once the importance of a fatal shot in his life. On March 28, 1922, at a political meeting in Berlin, Nabokov's father (also Vladimir) was shot by two monarchist reactionaries who were attempting to assassinate Pavel Miliukov, a leftist leader of the Russian emigration and a personal friend. Nabokov's father threw himself at the assassins courageously, was shot twice below the heart, and died immediately. His son was twenty-three at the time, still a student at Cambridge but a published poet, and about to announce his engagement to be married. He had worshipped his father and strongly identified with him, so that the death occasioned a virtual apotheosis of the man in his son's mind, turning a mere mortal father into a god. (Exactly that is described in the lyrical conclusion of "Perfect Past," the first chapter of *Speak, Memory*, where father becomes a "paradisiac personage" who has vaulted into the heavens "on his latest and loftiest

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flight," leaving the face of "whoever lies there" in the open coffin concealed.) But Nabokov never referred to the assassination itself if he could help it, omitted the event from his autobiography, went ahead with his life as if nothing had changed. He had already endured immeasurable losses as a result of the Bolshevik revolution in 1917; his father's death might have been only the latest of fate's many cruel jokes.

Yet everything had changed for Nabokov in 1922. Following the death of his father, he underwent a violent inner transformation. The self he had identified with his father (a man of action, political engagement, leadership, courage, and patriotic zeal) "died" just as Smurov claimed he did, and was replaced by an onlooker, an eye. Vladimir Vladimirovitch went on living, of course, but that was no longer his *real* identity: he was now the serene "V. Sirin," a pseudonym already adopted to distinguish his writing from his father's but used regularly until 1939; or he was "Cantab" when he published poems in England; or he became Fyodor Gudunov-Cherdyntsev in his great self-portrait-of-the-artist, *The Gift* (1936), or else "Vladimirov" in the same book. In English he anagrammed himself into three strange sisters, "Vivian Darkbloom," "Vivian Bloodmark," and "Vivian Calmbrood" (in Cyrillic alphabet *k* and *c* are the same); or sometimes he was simply "V.," perhaps the neatest cipher of all. But remember that the "V." could stand for Victor, the name he was, by mistake, half-christened with. He also liked the name on his passport, "Hazel Brown" (eyes HAZEL hair BROWN), but then again that dubious proof of identity was a Nansen passport which he unfailingly called a "Nonsense" passport. The pseudonymous Nabokov was not merely playing games. He knew, I think, that to have all these identities was to be nobody himself.

Smurov's strategy in *The Eye* is clearly a defensive maneuver, designed to distance himself from pain, humiliation, powerlessness. Like Nabokov, Smurov justifies his strategy by claiming to be an artist, one who exists only in his works or comes into existence only when his audience imagines him: "For I do not exist: there exist but the thousands of mirrors that reflect me. With every acquaintance I make, the population of phantoms resembling me increases. . . . I alone do not exist." Smurov differs from his creator Nabokov in many ways, the most important being that where Smurov fails to justify his claim to be an artist, Nabokov succeeds; but note how Smurov's "I" which so conveniently "does not exist" turns out to have (or affect) all the familiar traits of the Nabokovian public *persona*: supreme indifference toward all causes and *-isms*, amorality or an apparent moral coldness, playful but sometimes cruel manipulativeness, arrogance, egotism, loneliness (the exiled king or *solus rex* theme), narcissism, voyeurism, the equation of language with reality, and a ferocious will to happiness. This public mask, which Nabokov once described as "the character I impersonate at Montreux,"

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would seem to be pleased with the Smurov strategy. But that is not really the case. The more he declared himself to be happy (*Happiness* was to have been the title of his first novel) and his personal anguish immaterial, the more he knew it was a lie.

Again in this connection *The Eye* may be read as a covert autobiography of the most self-condemning sort:

> I have realized that the only happiness in this world is to observe, to spy, to watch, to scrutinize oneself and others, to be nothing but a big, slightly vitreous, somewhat bloodshot, unblinking eye. I swear that this is happiness. What does it matter that I am a bit cheap, a bit foul, and that no one appreciates all the remarkable things about me—my fantasy, my erudition, my literary gift . . .

Reading this as fiction we may think, poor Smurov, how his every utterance betrays him! Reading it through that mask, however, we recognize a bitter self-loathing in Nabokov: his sense of a sham happiness, of a grotesque obsession with spying, a fraudulent art, and a pathetic need for admiration. The whole story in fact may be understood as a howl of despair that he, Nabokov, does not really exist. *Conclusive Evidence*, the original title of his autobiography, was symptomatic of the same fundamental anxiety. It meant, he explained, "Conclusive evidence of my having existed."

Nabokov's most obsessive image for this condition was a shadow, *ombre*, or shade, which he could use to emphasize both the covert spy and the insubstantial being. Queerly enough, even the elderly Nabokov occasionally shadowed perfect strangers in the streets of Montreux ("I should not do it," he confessed, "but I cannot help it!"). But for the best example let us return again to that fatal shot. "Pale Fire," the poem written by John Shade (in the 1962 novel) begins, unforgettably,

> I was the shadow of the waxwing slain
> By the false azure in the windowpane;
> I was the smudge of ashen fluff—and I
> Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky.

By the end of the novel we know that John Shade has been shot, *à la* Nabokov *père*, by an assassin who mistook him for another. But the poet had already died a Smurovian death: lured into a false image of reality and condemned now to live on in an unreal world, a mere "smudge of ashen fluff." Again the unexpected note in this covert autobiography is self-condemnation. Reduced to a mere smudge or shadow, Nabokov depicts himself as dying and unworthily living on, a shadow of his father's unassailable, monumental life.

These speculations were set in motion by Andrew Field's latest

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and longest and least well-written book about Nabokov.[1] Every scholar must feel an enormous debt of gratitude to Field, despite his failings. He has persisted in thinking that Nabokov's brilliant fictions about himself need to be seen in the light of other lamps, narrated by other witnesses who have other kinds of truth to tell. Field's first book, *Nabokov: His Life in Art* (1966) is still probably the best guide to Nabokov's Russian works, and it speaks eloquently too about the impossibility of dealing with Nabokov by conventional biographical methods. Field's second book is a kind of warm-up for the recent one. Based on interviews with the author, his family and friends, *Nabokov: His Life in Part* (1977) is laced with "interruptions" from Nabokov, Véra, and others, calling into question the validity of his information. When Nabokov saw the completed manuscript in 1976, he threatened suit, and legal bickering continued for four years. So Field learned the hard way that what VN said was true became so—whether or not it could be refuted. The book contains much valuable detail about the Nabokov family history, life in St. Petersburg before the Revolution, and the Berlin period of Nabokov's career. The latest biography abbreviates these interesting subjects in order to detail the American and Swiss periods of Nabokov's life, 1940 to 1977. Most of this is richly detailed and amusing, if not particularly revelatory. What spoils the book is Field's decision to collate biography and literary analysis, working in discussions of all the major fiction and much else besides. These passages tend to be superficial, disorganized, digressive, and occasionally so careless of logic as to be incoherent (cf. the treatment of *Lolita*).

Dmitri Nabokov, the author's son, has already dubbed Field's book an "odd concoction of rancor, adulation, innuendo, and outright factual error," and one can see why. Field makes much, for example, of Nabokov's outrage and anger at anti-Semitism. The story is told of a cocktail party at the Nabokovs' at Cornell where one of his colleagues defended the selection of the anti-Semitic Ezra Pound for the Bollingen Prize, or at least seemed to defend it. Nabokov had to be restrained from throwing the man out of his house. Field construes this behavior as "extreme hypersensitivity," as if Nabokov who "was not Jewish himself" must have been a little berserk. I can only see Nabokov's behavior as a justified reaction to a complacent American toleration of despicable values. Nabokov's brother, after all, was murdered in a concentration camp. Even Humbert Humbert was sorry for Irving Flashman in Lolita's class because, as Nabokov explained, he was "the only Jew among all those Gentiles." Andrew Field has never imagined that sort of alienation, so he fails to appreciate Nabokov's moral passion.

Field goes similarly astray when he decides that the character

[1]VN: THE LIFE AND ART OF VLADIMIR NABOKOV, by *Andrew Field*. Crown. $19.95.

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Zina Merz in *The Gift*, who bears more than a little resemblance to Véra Nabokov (*née* Slonim), contains in her first name an anagram of the word Nazi. This is arrant nonsense, of course, and betrays ignorance of Nabokov's affectionate remembrance of a real Zina, one of his "seaside playmates" in *Speak, Memory*. Zina "isn't an orthodox Christian name," Field decrees, and by the time he's through with the Zina-Nazi idea you will long for Charles Kinbote's sanity. Even worse, perhaps, is Field's treatment of Nabokov's nickname for his mother, Elena Ivanovna. Although he knows full well that the nickname was "Lolya," Field gets it into his head because he's been given photocopies of letters from her son with the salutation scissored out, that this name was really "Lolita." "What brazen compulsion, the ultimate gesture of contempt for everything Freudian, brought Nabokov to use a version of his mother's nickname for the heroine of his greatest novel?" Flamboyantly begging the question, Field has nothing to learn about "brazen compulsion." Then to show off his powers of deduction he explains, "It is a word about *seven* letters long. . . . Lolita, *surely*, it seems to me." (Appalled italics mine.) Could a deliberate parody of Kinbote at his worst have been better than that? You have hallucinations real bad, chum.

Nabokov's private papers are closed to public scrutiny, by the terms of his will, until fifty years after the deaths of his wife and son. Despite that, Field has much greater freedom now that his subject is dead to tell both a fuller story and a more critical one. To this end he offers us a number of new or revamped theories about the figure he still believes is the greatest novelist of our century: (1) that he is fundamentally and profoundly Russian, and a "wild" one at that, with a deep dark strain of incest in the genealogy to explain the author's perverse "bend sinister"; (2) that he was a libertine in his early manhood, often keeping several affairs simmering at once, and that this continued at a lesser rate long after he married Véra in 1925 (even if true, these claims all fail to deliver the shock Field seems to want); (3) that the key to Nabokov's personality may be found in modern theories of narcissism, which Field has been only very recently reading and hasn't digested yet, much less been able to apply successfully; and finally (4) that his art is always keyed to his life, a long skein of autobiographical fictions which may, when viewed from the right angles, be decoded into the *real* life of Vladimir Nabokov.

This last theory (nowhere loudly proclaimed at us, for once) is the only one that produces genuine insight into both the writer and his work. Notably, too, these ideas are all left at the level of suggestion, as for example when Field suggests that Smurov and Hermann embody, against all appearances to the contrary, important aspects of Nabokov's identity, or when he hints that *Transparent Things* (1973) and *Look at the Harlequins* (1975) should be read as "personal statements" of the elderly Nabokov's "weariness and

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doubt." Field is similarly good on the fraudulence of *Ada*, his best piece of sustained criticism. Just as often, alas, these biographical assumptions produce very lame results indeed: that Nina, the elusive woman in "Spring in Fialta," *is* someone Nabokov actually had an affair with, or that Darwin in *Glory* whom Nabokov said was "wholly invented" *is* a composite of Peter Mrosovsky and Rab Butler. So? Field forgets that fiction is not exactly a matter of transposing data from one place to another, nor is understanding fiction a question of simply possessing these "keys."

Meanwhile VN lives on, flies on in the reflected sky of his son, Dmitri. He now "becomes" his father by continuing the work of translating Russian texts into English, writing to *The New York Review of Books* to defend Father against some slur Edmund Wilson made in his diary three decades ago, and most recently by composing an afterword to "The Enchanter" (a preliminary sketch for *Lolita*)[2] couched in what he imagines to be his father's most magisterial style. "If one is in quest of quotable bits of credo," Dmitri will write, then the reader should consult a 1927 story which "concedes another rare peek into the essence of his ethos." A grotesque parody of his father's elegant essay "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," Dmitri's piece is fully half as long as the very slight story it concerns. After a lot of wind-up, defending Father against the harmful drudges of scholarship and heaping praise on a dubious assortment of Nabokovian tricks, Dmitri reveals at last that what he "loves" about "The Enchanter" are "the suspense" and "the descriptions."

The story itself reminds one constantly of how saturated with life *Lolita* is—how richly it depends on its detailed renderings of the American scene, how funny and sad and many-voiced Humbert is, and how vital to it all is a *real* Dolores Haze instead of a solipsistic figment. "The Enchanter" never quite sounds like an authentic Nabokov story, lacking the nuances that might give it voice. Either this manuscript was only an imperfect first draft, or an awkward translation makes it sound that way: "The girl heaved a sigh in her sleep, opening her tightly shut navel like an eye, then slowly, with a cooing moan breathed out, and that was all she needed to glide on in her previous torpor." The hero is also made to breathe strangely, "with *baited* breath." At the crucial moment his sexuality is made gross and a bit pornographic, and then the story hurries to a hasty conclusion as if the theme had proved void.

Dmitri follows a familiar practice of his father in issuing peremptory judgments of the central figure: "cynical," "contemptible," and "rotten," not without redeeming moments of pathos, but still "distasteful," "basically evil," and even "very rotten." Methinks he doth protest too much. It recalls the way Nabokov talked of Humbert

[2]THE ENCHANTER, by *Vladimir Nabokov*. Translated by *Dmitri Nabokov*. G. P. Putnam's Sons. $16.95.

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and Hermann in his 1966 Foreword to *Despair*: "Both are neurotic scoundrels, yet there is a green lane in Paradise where Humbert is permitted to wander at dusk once a year; but Hell shall never parole Hermann." Both of these judgments are needlessly harsh and categorical. They deny the subtlety of a painstaking art that made their desperate lives queerly human and interesting. Such "strong opinions" betray a need to conceal and defend. Andrew Field suggested in 1966 that Nabokov's greatest satisfaction as an artist came in direct proportion to his sense of the distance he effected "between himself and his creation." "According to Marx," the amused Field wrote, "alienation occurs in culture at the historical moment when men can no longer recognize and identify themselves with their own work." That seems less amusing and more true of Nabokov now. He tried to cancel and curse the neurotic scoundrels in himself; he scoffed at history ("I confess I do not believe in time") and willed his own happiness with Smurovian intensity. He often succeeded in feeling what John Shade expressed in his book on Pope, *Supremely Blest.* But at other times he knew that was a lie.

Coming in the Summer 1987 issue of The Hudson Review: "The Successful Career of Robert Bly" by Dana Gioia and "The Lives and Deaths of Charlotte Brontë" by Harold Fromm. Poems by A. R. Ammons.

Velvet felt confus
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WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Fordie

"GOOD LITERATURE IS PRODUCED BY A FEW QUEER PEOPLE in odd corners," T. S. Eliot wrote to Ford Madox Ford in 1924, the occasion of Ford's launching his second and short-lived magazine, *The Transatlantic Review*. One of Eliot's typically throwaway definitions of big subjects (Poetry is "a mug's game," *The Waste Land* nothing more than "rhythmical grumbling"), it was appropriately directed at a very queer person indeed who by that date had brought forth some sixty-four titles—poems, novels, biography, children's fairy tales, polemic, and sociology—held together only by their author's personality and their devotion to literary impressionism. Until very recently, all or almost all of those titles, plus the twenty-four or so others Ford added to them during the last fourteen years of his life, were—except for *The Good Soldier*—out of print. (I more than once had to forego teaching *Parade's End* because of its unavailability.) Now a glance through *Paperbound Books in Print* reveals not only those novels but two of Ford's memoirs (*Memories and Impressions*; *Return to Yesterday*), a selection from his criticism, a selected poems, his historical novel *The Fifth Queen*, and a few other titles (*No Enemy*; *Provence*). Could it be that, almost fifty years after his death, Ford's reputation in this country (though not in England) has stabilized itself?

Not, I think, if it means that aside from *The Good Soldier* and the first volume of the Tietjens tetralogy, *Some Do Not*, his books are much read or taught. Over the past few decades, along with Arthur Mizener's solid biography there have been a number of critical studies, mostly of Ford's novels, by American academics; but the outstanding recent contribution to our understanding of him has been Sondra Stang's. Five years ago she put together a first-rate collection of essays about Ford (*The Presence of Ford Madox Ford*, University of Pennsylvania Press) and has now followed with an ample selection from his own writings.[1] In a foreword to the book, Graham Greene, probably the English novelist who most admires Ford, tells us that for reasons of copyright Mrs. Stang could not reprint parts of *The Good Soldier* or *Parade's End*. But those books need to be read in their entirety, and the idea of a Reader should be to point people who know some of Ford's books in the direction of others they don't know so well or at all. In fact Ford is not the kind of novelist—if there is such a kind—who takes well to excerpting, and

[1]THE FORD MADOX FORD READER, ed. by *Sondra Stang*. The Ecco Press. $13.50p.

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the first section of the Reader, with bits from seven of his lesser-known fictions (justly lesser-known, I should say) is tough and not especially profitable going. (I was pleased with the section from his romance about Henry Hudson, *The 'Half-Moon,'* but otherwise found myself just turning pages.) The good things come later and include selections from Ford's memoirs and reminiscences; his literary, cultural, and art criticism; his poetry; some miscellany; and a concluding group of sixty unpublished letters.

Ford believed—he and Conrad believed it together—that the English language was ill-suited to good prose because of what he called "the associations that, like burrs, cling undetachable to every English word." Even the simplest English sentence, especially by comparison with a French one, "is forever blurred because it can always have several meanings." Thus his endless praise of Flaubert's *Coeur Simple*, or of Turgenev ("the beautiful genius"), and the relative deploring of Dickens and Thackeray, English producers of what he disparagingly called "the nuvvle." (Yet Ford, at least in his late work *The March of Literature*, rightly praised Trollope as a great realist.) He said repeatedly, probably every morning upon arising, that the "exact use of words" was the most important thing in the world, but whatever standards of exactness he held didn't prevent him from turning out books of all sorts at an astonishing clip, most of which do not cry out for the kind of microscopic attending-to that an "exact use of words" would seem to demand. My own feeling is that this battle cry of exactitude was an homage to France, but that Ford's writing needs to be appreciated in rather different terms. He memorably characterized Hemingway's words as striking the reader "each one, as if they were pebbles fetched fresh from a brook. They live and shine, each in its place." With Ford it's not so much words, rather the voice that utters them which charms us.

He charms us with this voice when, in a section from his pre-Raphaelite memoir, *Ancient Lights* (*Memories and Impressions* in this country) he evokes the voice of one of those poets who used to read aloud at his father's house:

> Mournfully then, up and down the stone staircases, there would flow two hollow sounds. For, in those days, it was the habit of all poets and poetesses to read aloud upon every possible occasion, and whenever they read aloud to employ an imitation of the voice invented by the late Lord Tennyson and known, in those days, as the *ore rotundo*—'with the round mouth mouthing out their hollow o's and a's.'
>
> The effect of this voice heard from outside a door was to a small child particularly awful. It went on and on, suggesting the muffled baying of a large hound dog that is permanently dissatisfied with the world.

As is typically the case with Ford's effects, even at deeply serious

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moments from *The Good Soldier* or *Parade's End*, there is something funny in what's going on. Ford's stature as a humorist hasn't been paid sufficient attention to because critics are busy being earnest about what a crafty, resourceful novelist he was. But it is a humorous craft.

The humor, the fun (something funny going on) is in no way a comic relief from more serious matters. Probably Ford's best account of how the novelist gets the effect of "life" in his work occurs in his memoir of Conrad (Sondra Stang includes the passage) and is directed against the notion that a novel should report or narrate life directly. No, says Ford, that is not the way to do it:

> Life does not say to you: in 1914 my next-door neighbour, Mr Slack, erected a greenhouse and painted it with Cox's green aluminium paint. Rather, and if you think about the matter [I excerpt from his account] you will remember, in various unordered pictures, how one day Mr Slack appeared in his garden and contemplated the wall of his house. You will then try to remember the year of that occurrence . . . You will remember Mr Slack—then much thinner because it was before he found out where to buy that cheap Burgundy of which he has since drunk an inordinate quantity, though whisky you think would be much better for him! Mr Slack again came into his garden, this time with a pale-weaselly-faced fellow, who touched his cap from time to time. . . . At this point you will remember that you were then the manager of the fresh-fish branch of Messrs Catlin and Clovis in Fenchurch Street. . . . What a change since then! Millicent had not yet put her hair up.

He leads us on through Millicent's hair before and after putting it up; to Mr. Mills, the vicar, talking to her; to Millicent's troublesome expression; and so to Cox's Aluminium Paint—"the half-empty tin that Mr Slack showed you—he had a most undignified cold"—etc. And, Ford concludes triumphantly, "if that is how the building of your neighbour's greenhouse comes back to you, just imagine how it will be with your love affairs that are so much more complicated." Really this passage is all anyone needs to become a good reader of Ford's novels in which the Impressionist "method" is at work. But it is memorable, surely, because of the man named Slack, his cheap Burgundy, the weasely-faced fellow who accompanies him, Millicent's troublesome hair, and, of course, Cox's Aluminium Paint. Something funny about the whole business.

Some of the bits from Ford's writings included in this selection are ones with which only the devoted Fordian would be acquainted: his introduction to Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*; a letter written about *Finnegans Wake* to the *Saturday Review* near the end of his life; a fine, short "Memories of Oscar Wilde"; the chapter he wrote for Conrad's *Nostromo* when Conrad was ill and couldn't make his weekly installment; a pamphlet of 1912 titled *This Monstrous Regiment of*

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Women in which his feelings as an "ardent" "enraged" "suffragette" are aired. And then there are the individual sentences one may or may not have come across: "The first duty of philosophy is to help men live their lives; the first duty of learning is to teach the children of men that the objects of learned study are beautiful" (I think that both Henry James and Secretary of Education William Bennett would approve). Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale* is "the supreme monument of the letters of our country"—a judgment probably shared by no one else you could locate. "Yet the great novels of the world . . . have all been mystery stories"—this, by contrast, is something to think about. In response to his publisher who had objected to *The Saddest Story* (too depressing, especially during wartime) as a title for what eventually became *The Good Soldier*, Ford said, "Why not call the book 'The Roaring Joke'?" A less than roaring but wholly endearing joke is a long one from *Return to Yesterday* about the Gypsy, the Ukrainian, and the porkchop, as told to Ford by a humorous Russian nihilist ("Zay was going along a road and zay saw a porg tchop lying on it . . . 'You poor Ukrainian,' said ze Gypsy, 'you are too stchupid to have ze porg tchop. Zay are for fine Gypsy fellows' " etc.). My favorite single sentence is from a pamphlet of 1923: "By carefully going through the Alphabet, and my calling book, I have found that I know at the present moment 1,642 men and women."

On a grimmer note there are some dignified but sad complaints about the fate of his writings. In 1929, after the Tietjens books had appeared, he wrote to an admirer saying that his books received good reviews but that "The curious thing is that their voices seem to make no impression whatever upon the public and my sales in England are so small that I have nearly come to the conclusion not to publish there at all." In the final year of his life he wrote his publisher Stanley Unwin, "If you could possibly see your way to lending me say £250 it would be of most immense service to me and in the end would be of some benefit to yourself because it would mean that I could return to France and finish my novel in some peace of mind . . . I know that it is very indecent of me to make this request but my necessities at the moment are very urgent and I see nothing else whatever to do." And he asks Unwin to forgive him for "the pain of having to read this letter." Robert Lowell's lines come to mind—

> But master, mammoth mumbler, tell me why
> the bales of your left-over novels buy
> less than a bandage for your gouty foot

—as does Ezra Pound's tribute of many years earlier: "It is well that one man should have a vision of perfection and that he should be sick to the death and disconsolate because he cannot attain it." "Ford, you were a kind man and you died in want," Lowell's poem concludes. One imagines how pleased he would have been by this Reader, so intelligently and lovingly put together by Sondra Stang.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

North Point Press will publish a new collection of WENDELL BERRY's essays, entitled *Home Economics*, in June, and in the fall a book of his poems entitled *Sabbath*. . . . JOHN P. SISK* is Arnold Professor of the Humanities Emeritus at Gonzaga University in Washington. . . . NIKKI STILLER* teaches poetry to engineers at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, and lives in Manhattan. . . . A. R. AMMONS has two books due out in 1987, both from W. W. Norton. One is an expanded version of his *Selected Poems* and the other is a book of new poems called *Sumerian Vistas*. . . . KATHLEEN HILL lives and teaches in New York City where she is working on a collection of stories. . . . MARK JARMAN's latest book of poetry is *Far and Away* (Carnegie-Mellon University Press). He is beginning work on a book called for now *Despair: The History of Narrative in American Poetry*. . . . VERN RUTSALA's most recent book, *Backtracking*, was published by Story Line Press in 1985. . . . JEFFREY HARRISON* lives in Washington, D.C. His chapbook, *The Singing Underneath*, was recently published by Windhover Press. . . . MARTHA RONK LIFSON* teaches at Occidental College in Los Angeles. A book of her poems will be published by Red Hill Press. . . . JAMES BAKER HALL teaches at the University of Kentucky. His second book of poems, *Stopping at the Edge to Wave*, will be published by Wesleyan University Press in August 1988.

JOYCE CAROL OATES has been named the first Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Lecturer at Princeton University. She is the author of, most recently, *Raven's Wing*, a story collection, and the book-length essay *On Boxing*. . . . J. MITCHELL MORSE, a professor emeritus of English at Temple University, is the author of *The Irrelevant English Teacher, Prejudice and Literature*, and other books. . . . MAUREEN MULLARKEY is a painter who writes on art and culture. . . . RICHARD HORNBY's book, *Script into Performance: A Structuralist View of Play Production* has just been reissued, in paperback, by Paragon House. . . . The University Press of America will publish BERT CARDULLO's* collection of essays entitled *Indelible Images: New Perspectives on Classic Films* this spring. . . . MICHAEL GORRA won the 1986 Alden Dissertation Prize given by the English Department at Stanford University. He teaches at Smith College. . . . JAMES FINN COTTER has been writing poetry about Ireland and completing some articles on Dante, G. M. Hopkins, Vincent van Gogh, and J. D. Salinger. . . . EMILY GROSHOLZ is completing a book on Descartes and Leibnitz as well as her second collection of poems. . . . DEAN FLOWER recently received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to give a seminar for secondary school teachers on "The Divided Self: Hawthorne, Dickinson, and James" to be held at Smith College this summer.

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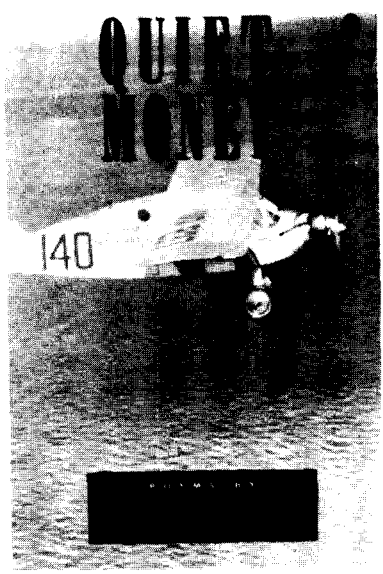

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IN THIS ISSUE:

It is arguable, I think, that our country's culture is still suspended as if at the end of *Huckleberry Finn*, assuming that its only choices are either a deadly "civilization" of piety and violence or an escape into some "Territory" where we may remain free of adulthood and community obligation. We want to be free; we want to have rights; we want to have power; we do not yet want much to do with responsibility. We have imagined the great and estimable freedom of boyhood, of which Huck Finn remains the finest spokesman. We have imagined the bachelorhoods of nature and genius and power: the contemplative, the artist, the hunter, the cowboy, the general, the president—lives dedicated and solitary in the Territory of individual adventure or responsibility. But boyhood and bachelorhood have remained our norms of "liberation," for women as well as men. We have hardly begun to imagine the coming to responsibility that is the meaning, and the liberation, of growing up.

—Wendell Berry, "Writer and Region," p.15.

The flight from woman which Leslie Fiedler has explored in the American novel is seen here as extending itself, lengthening into a journey away from the other, and one's feelings. This escape, of course, is its own terrible prison. The American males in this film are in the end as lonely and silent and beautiful as the trees in the bayou, as the trees on their island at the crossroads.

—Nikki Stiller, "A Sad and Beautiful Film," p. 48.

The Devil, sensitive as he is to time, place, and circumstance, always presents himself in the most acceptable form. In Hawthorne's story he comes on disguised as one of David Riesman's inside dopesters, since he promises his faithful the bonus of a penetration into "the deep mystery of sin, the fountain of all wicked arts," which are the source of all power.

—John P. Sisk, "The Devil and American Epic," p. 31.

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